



Healthy Minds, Healthy Farms

Exploring the Connection between Mental Health and
Farm Business Management

Final Report

A research report commissioned by Farm Management Canada.

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Advocate Level Partner



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Executive Summary

Overview

Agriculture contributes \$111.9 billion per year to the Canadian economy, and accounts for 6.7% of Canada's gross domestic product.¹ In 2016, the agriculture and agri-food industry employed 2.3 million, or one in eight Canadians.² Canada has set a lofty goal of increasing agri-food exports to \$85 billion by 2025 (an increase from \$64.6 billion in 2017).³

It is clear that agriculture is vital for the Canadian economy. The well-being of farmers is key to a healthy agricultural sector. Yet, recent research indicates that 45% of farmers have high stress levels.⁴

The conversation around improving the mental health of all Canadians has been elevated in recent years. In 2019, the Canadian Mental Health Association released its report *Going it alone: The Mental Health and well-being of Canada's Entrepreneurs*.⁵ In the same year, the House of Commons of Canada's Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food released their report to Senate, *Mental Health: A Priority for our Farmers*, which provided recommendations for Federal government to prioritize actions that can improve the mental health of our country's farmers. Efforts to support positive mental health in Canada must include our farmers.

In recognition of the contribution of farmers to the Canadian economy, support for farm businesses continues to be delivered across the country through federal, provincial and territorial governments; not-for-profit organizations; and community groups.

The mental health of Canada's farmers as it relates to farm business management is of critical economic, and public health importance. This study aims to improve our understanding of the relationship between mental health and farm business management. More specifically, the study highlights how mental health can be supported through farm business management, and how farm business management can contribute to positive mental health.

Note to reader: Much of this research was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This event impacts farmer mental health, however, the results in this report only briefly cover the topic through the lens of emergency preparedness.

Objective

This study sought to improve our understanding of the relationship between farm business management practices and farmer mental health by studying:

- Business and lifestyle factors that influence farmer mental health.
- How farm business management practices can positively or negatively impact farmer mental health.
- How mental health can enable or restrict strong farm business management.

Research Methods

To achieve our objectives, the research team:

- Conducted a literature review, citing over 150 grey and academic sources.
- Conducted a nationwide survey of 1,735 Canadian farmers.*
- Led 14 focus groups with 113 participants in total.
- Conducted 72 on-on-one interviews with farmers and industry representatives.



* With gratitude to Farm Credit Canada for co-ordinating survey distribution through the (FCC) Vision Panel. The survey was a collaborative partnership between the research team, Farm Management Canada, and Farm Credit Canada.

Key Findings

Stress and the Canadian farming population:

- 62% of Canadian farmers are categorized with mid-stress scores and 14% with high stress.
- The leading causes of stress for Canadian farmers are industry unpredictability, workload pressures, and financial pressures.
- Women are more likely to report high stress.
- Younger farmers show signs of higher stress compared to older farmers and may not cope with stress as well as other age groups.
- Growing operations are more likely to be stressed about finances compared to mature operations.

Connections between mental health and farm business management:

- 21% of farmers indicate they regularly follow a written business plan, and 48% indicate they never or rarely do.
- Regularly following a written farm business plan contributes to peace of mind and more effective coping mechanisms.
- Farmers who use a written business plan also frequently follow other business practices such as adhering to a budget, benchmarking performance, seeking training, and communicating about the future of the farm with those impacted.
- Farmer optimism contributes to farmers adopting more effective coping mechanisms and beneficial business management practices.
- Business management practices are less frequent amongst younger farmers.
- Business management practices can improve on-farm relationships.
- Business management planning does not eliminate stress entirely.

Effectiveness of support programs for Canadian farmers:

- There are examples of effective models for farmer mental health support in Canada.
- Farmers are more likely to participate in mental health support programs offered by providers familiar with agriculture and that cater to the unique needs of farmers.
- Lack of access to mental health support in rural Canada remains a critical gap in supporting public health.

There are three guiding principles for supporting and bridging mental health and business management:

A RISK MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Risk management is language that resonates with farmers in the context of business planning as well as the peace of mind that can support positive mental health.

A TEAM APPROACH

Building support teams involving advisors, family and peers can alleviate the pressures of decision-making.

A PREPAREDNESS APPROACH

Planning ahead does not mean predicting the future – it means preparing for whatever might happen in the future. This is a key shift in current perceptions of farm business planning.

Recommendations

Our research has led to four (4) recommendations for supporting and delivering business services for farmers in ways that are beneficial for mental health. These recommendations are aimed to ensure that agriculture remains a vital contributor to Canada's economy.

Recommendation 1: Continue raising awareness around the importance of farmer mental health.

Actions:

- Communicate the impacts of mental health on those working in agriculture.
- Promote and support campaigns aimed at raising awareness about farmer mental health and reducing stigma.
- Develop industry-wide strategies to address online harassment by the general public targeted at farmers and agricultural workers. There is a need to educate the public on realities of Canadian agriculture.
- Explore opportunities to enhance rural public health capacity as it relates to mental health.
- Continue to advocate for accelerated high-speed internet infrastructure in rural Canada. This infrastructure is a necessity for both business management technologies and online mental health service delivery.
- Communicate the connection between mental health and farm business management including the impact of mental health on managing the farm and farm business management practices that support mental health.

Recommendation 2: Support the improvement of mental health literacy for farmers and those supporting farmers.

Actions:

- Deliver mental health information sessions and training at industry events and through online learning channels.
- Explore new communication and learning channels to promote mental health literacy such as forums where farmers feel safe to share their stories
- Develop and provide a list of existing mental health resources for farmers to be provided during industry learning events. This can also be shared through print materials, agricultural media, and other farm organization communication channels.
- Advocate for mental health literacy training in college and university programs to promote long-term mental health.
- Advocate for agricultural advisors and others who have regular contact with farmers (e.g., family, peers, etc.) to take mental health literacy training. The industry as a whole would benefit from greater sensitivity and skills to recognize and support those struggling with mental health issues.
- Support mental health literacy training among farmers through expansion of programs such as the In the Know program.
- Explore means of securing funding to further support and subsidize mental health literacy programs for farmers and those supporting farmers.

Recommendation 3: Deliver business management advice, tools and training that focuses on risk management and preparedness as a means of facing uncertainty.

Actions:

- Develop and use language around risk management, scenario and contingency planning, or preparedness when giving advice about long-term business planning. Convey the message to farmers that business planning is not meant to be static or rigid and that it can help to be prepared or get ready for the future
- Make business skills workshops more accessible in rural and remote areas. Considerations may include grants/bursaries or investments in technologies for rural-based farm organizations.
- Continue to provide training workshops to educate farmers about ways to effectively incorporate business management on the farm. Resources for farmers could include easy-to-use templates for common activities, scenario planning tools, and business plan templates that include risk and contingency elements. Incorporating some formality into a farm business, such as business planning and business meetings, can help make it more manageable. How to build an effective decision support team is another strategy that can be promoted (e.g., who to include and how they can help).
- Increase accessibility and availability of risk management and scenario planning tools that can help farmers prepare for the uncertainty they will face in the future. For example, the Farm Management Canada Roots to Success training program. Roots to Success is a training program that uses the various risk areas and addresses them throughout a workshop type setting in which farmers and advisors go through each risk area and address their own farm. It is teaching individuals how to create a risk management plan.
- Explore ways to incorporate mental health into emergency management planning.
- Conduct medium to long term research on the effects of farm business management on farmer mental health. The goal of this research should be to find effective ways to deliver farm business management as a means to cope with farm-related stressors.

Recommendation 4: Advocate for farmer-specific mental health support services.

Actions:

- Promote successful programs to farmers who are eligible for them in each province.
- Advocate for the expansion of successful mental health support programs such as P.E.I.'s Farmer Assistance Program, Quebec's Sentinel Program and farm stress and crisis lines in provinces where they do not exist. Consider national programming to effectively and equitably service all provinces and territories. Promote the importance of including program staff with experience and knowledge of agriculture and the realities of farming.
- Explore opportunities to target demographic groups including youth and women with mental health support services that meet their unique needs.
- Establish a means for collaboration between industry organizations and governments to establish a community of practice or national centre to share knowledge for rural mental health resources.
- Explore opportunities for research on the potential to revitalize extension services across Canada as a means of providing accessible and affordable support for farm business management.

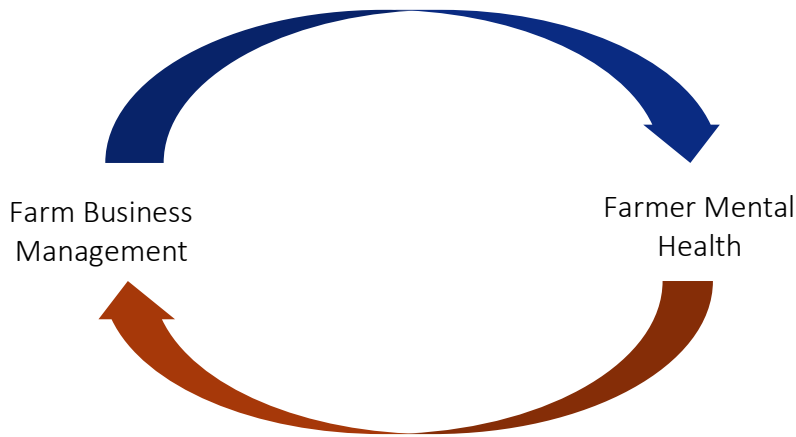
1.0 Introduction

Agriculture is vital to the Canadian economy, and the well-being of farmers is key to a healthy agricultural sector. Farming culture is unique in many ways. It is a way of life, not just a livelihood. The connection to the land, the burden of regularly taking on large debt, the realities of working and living on the farm, and (often) the responsibility of managing a multi-generational legacy all contribute to this unique way of life. Farmers in rural areas are more isolated, with less access to communications and health care infrastructure. High uncertainty and variability have always been part of farming, but farmers today are feeling additional stresses from market volatility, trade issues, social pressures, and environmental changes.

Recent Canadian research has shown a significant public health concern regarding farmer mental health. A 2015 survey from researchers at the University of Guelph found that 45% of farmers have high levels of stress.⁶ These results have led to calls for a better understanding of the specific stressors that impact Canadian farmers' mental health and factors that may alleviate the negative impacts of stress. In particular, there was a need for more research to inform better mental health supports and interventions.



This report summarizes existing literature and contributes primary research on the connection between mental health and farm business management. This connection is explored from both sides of the relationship. For example, how does effective farm business management impact or support farmer mental health? As well as conversely, how does mental health impact or support farm business decision-making?



This report also analyzes the relationships among farm stress factors and farm business management practices, assesses some of the resources currently provided to farmers, and contributes to the wider literature on mental health and farming. Ultimately, the findings from this research inform recommendations that address farmer mental health from a broad perspective. Re-positioned delivery of farm business management training is among a suite of recommendations to positively influence farmer mental health.

1.1 What We Know About Mental Health and Farm Business Management

What we know about farmer mental health

Mental health is considered to be on a continuum that represents a person's state of well-being.⁷ Everyone has mental health and is always somewhere along this continuum (Figure 1). Mental illness refers to disorders or conditions that medical professionals may diagnose, such as major depressive disorder, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and addictions. The scope of this research was limited to mental health. Emphasis was placed on examining the degree to which farm business management can contribute to positive mental health.

The scope of this research was grounded in the relationship between farm business management and farmer mental health from a well-being perspective.



Figure 1: Quadrant of mental wellness and illness.
(From In the Know mental health literacy training program for agriculture, by Jones-Bitton, A., & Hagen, B.).

Long periods of high stress and uncertainty can cause other chronic illnesses, which are known to lead to increased anxiety and depression.⁸ As shown in Figure 2, stress be beneficial or harmful, where longer term, chronic stress can lead to burnout and other physical ailments (e.g., cardiovascular disease or substance abuse). Burnout has been associated with job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and presenteeism that can negatively impact business and farm productivity.^{9,10}

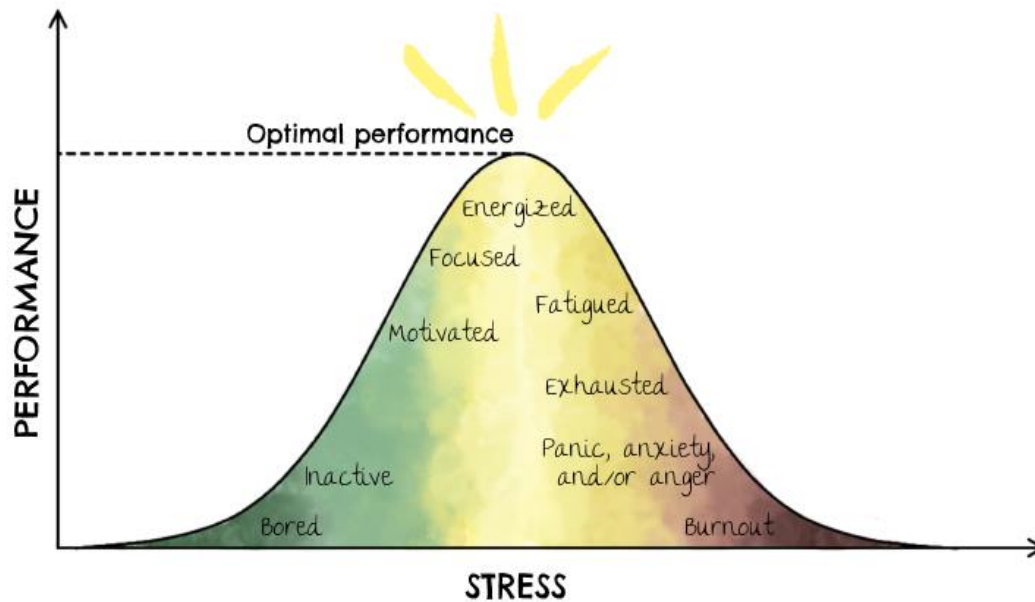


Figure 2. Stress curve and work performance.
Source: Hagen and Jones-Bitton (unpublished).

Recent surveys have shown that farmers have an increased risk of poor mental health. This appears to be true when comparing Canadian farmers to general populations and to farmers in other countries.¹¹ Canadian farmers show signs of exhaustion and cynicism that contribute to burnout, which in turn has implications for mental health.¹² These studies call for mental health service improvements to address the needs of Canada's farmers. They note that families, friends, communities, and industries all have roles to play in supporting farmer well-being.

High stress and strains on mental health have been found to impact farm animal welfare,¹³ on-farm safety,¹⁴ and decision making.¹⁵ Yet until now little research has explored the connection between these types of impacts and farm business management.

Rural life presents unique stressors such as isolation, reduced public services,¹⁶ reduced anonymity, and stigma around seeking mental health services.¹⁷ Agricultural work can involve a heavy workload,¹⁸ work being impacted by weather, family-business complications, and difficult discussions around business decisions. Farmers often see their role as a key part of their identity and have a hard time separating themselves from their work and the farm business.¹⁹



Workload pressures

Limited time to interact with family and friends and participate in leisure activities.



Conflicts with family and/or associates

Difference in opinions over farm management decisions or professional values associated with the farm business leading to family or associate conflict.



Financial pressures

Financial pressures including price margins, payment of debts, employee payroll, rising input costs and other expenses.



Isolation

Lack of social interaction, healthcare and recreational/social services due to rurality.



Farm transition

Transition planning and the stress associated with maintaining the farm legacy.



Unpredictability

External stressors including weather, price/markets, agricultural policy and legislation, machinery breakdowns and disease outbreaks.



Public trust

Criticism of farming in the media reducing pride and confidence.



Social stigma

The perceived social "shame" of having mental health challenges.

Figure 3. Summary of unique stressors Canadian farmers face.

What we know about farm business management

We know that farm business management practices are correlated with profitability.²⁰ The key business management practices that have been found to differentiate top performing farms are:²¹

- Seek training and learning opportunities
- Use detailed accounting systems to make decisions
- Work with business advisors
- Have a written business plan that is followed and reviewed on an annual basis
- Keep detailed records for production costs and implications for profits
- Assess risks and make a plan to manage risks
- Use a budget and financial plan in making decisions

Broadly speaking, the Canadian agricultural sector has been slow to adopt farm business management tools. A 2017 assessment found that only 26% of Canadian farmers had a written business plan, and a 2016 study found that only 8% of farmers had written a farm transition plan.²² Since there is a relationship between management practices and business success, it is reasonable that promoting management practices can help alleviate financial stress and foster improved mental health among Canadian farmers.

Recent research shows:

26% of Canadian farmers have a written business plan.

8.4% of Canadian farmers have a written farm transition plan.

Extension Services

Knowledge extension services can provide help to farmers in managing farm businesses. These services include consultations with subject matter experts, the distribution of research results, farmer participation in research, the development of hubs where farmers can share knowledge, and more. Extension services are typically provided by industry experts from government or academic institutions and are typically free of charge to farmers. Although these services have been reduced in Canada in recent years, they are still a valuable resource for the agricultural sector.²³

Examples of agricultural extension services include:

- Subject matter experts available to consult on issues and opportunities for individual farms
- Knowledge transfer of research into practical application
- Coordination of participatory research projects
- Providing a hub for farmers to share knowledge
- Programs to encourage and facilitate the adoption of innovative practices or technologies
- Programs to encourage skills development and the use of farm business advisory services

In addition to extension services, farm business support is available through consultants, agronomists, and advisors. In combination with public extension services, these business advisors can play an important role in providing up to date knowledge and information to support decision making on the farm.

The research and programs described here provide a brief introduction to the topics addressed by this project. The following section describes the extensive engagement with farmers and other industry professionals across Canada in order to better understand the relationship between farmer mental health and farm business management.

2.0 Research Methods

This study applied a mixed methods approach to investigate the relationship between farmer mental health and farm business management. As shown in Figure 4, research began with an environmental scan of Canadian and international literature. This scan aimed to provide a review of existing research and programs across Canada and around the world relating to farmer mental health and farm business management, and to identify and leverage any existing research connecting the two that could inform the next phases of the project.²⁴

A team of 18 cross-disciplinary industry professionals comprised the Advisory Committee for this project. The Advisory Committee reviewed the scan and provided guidance on the engagement phase of the research to inform key areas of focus and questions to investigate throughout the engagement phase. The scan and Advisory Committee support informed the development of a quantitative survey, focus group topics, and interview questions. The Advisory Committee also helped inform demographics to target and connected the project team with research participants.

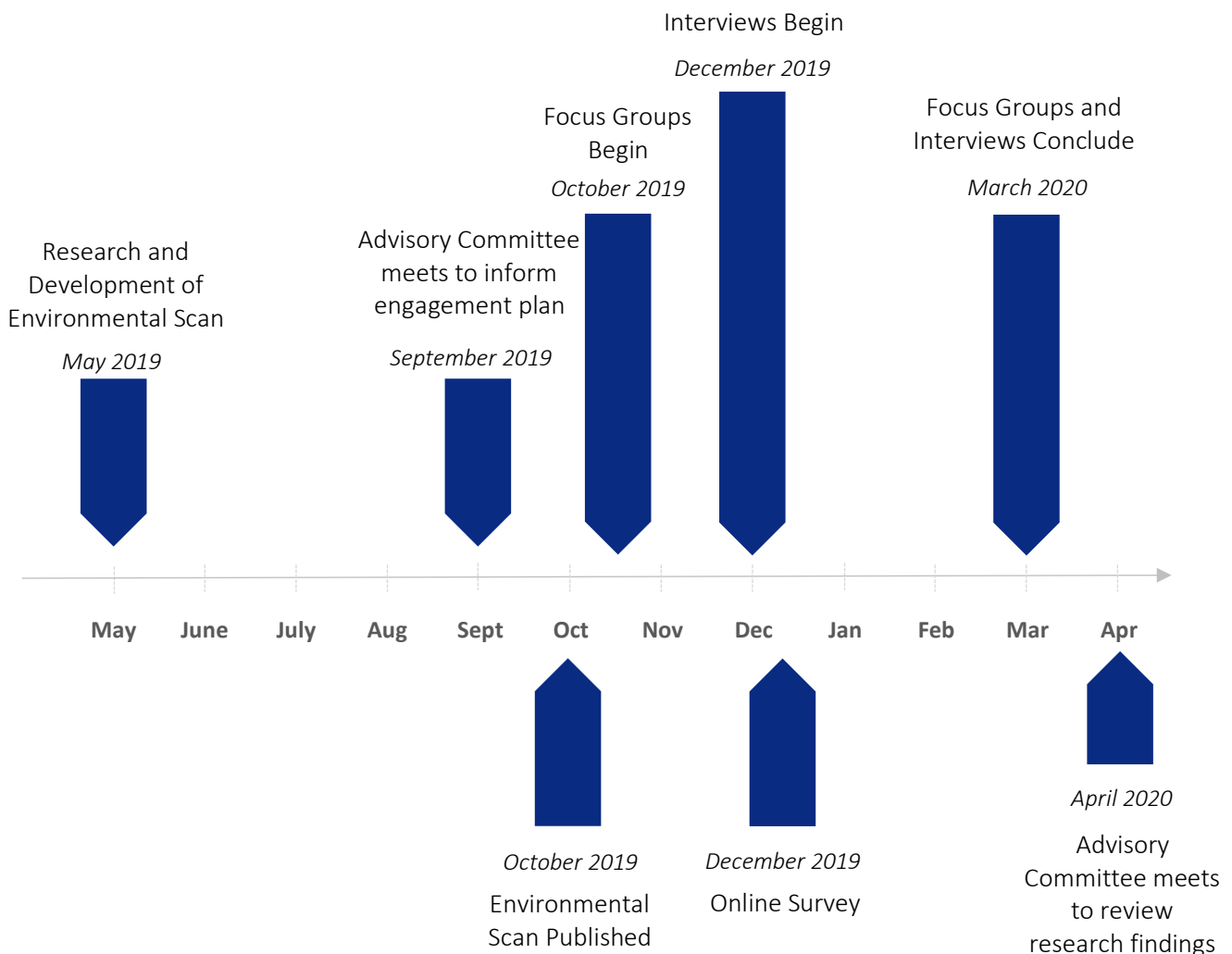


Figure 4. Overview of project timelines.

RESEARCH PLANNING		
Environmental Scan		Advisory Committee Support
200+	Academic and grey literature reviewed to inform the key gaps to be addressed through this project.	18 Industry professionals convened to provide insights to inform the engagement methods.
ENGAGEMENT		
Interviews	Focus groups	Online survey
72 Interviews total in	14 Focus groups in total with 113 attendees.	1,735 Farmers participated
30 Farmers	70 Farmers	Provided a large sample of the Canadian agricultural sector, with variation in:
29 Agricultural Industry	24 Agricultural Industry	
9 Health Services	11 Health Services	
4 Government/Academia	8 Government/Academia	
185 people directly engaged through interviews and focus groups.		Age Gender Province Commodity

Figure 5: Summary of research methods and engagement metrics.

2.1 The Online Survey: Hearing from Farmers

In October 2019, within the context of this project, a collaboration was initiated with Farm Credit Canada (FCC) to conduct a national online survey with farmers using FCC Vision. FCC Vision is a research panel specializing in Canadian agricultural research.²⁵ Panel members engage in surveys to share opinions and ideas about aspects of Canadian agriculture. Collaboration with FCC involved joint development of a survey that was launched in December 2019. Participation in the survey required individuals to be members of the Vision Panel.

The Vision Panel maintains a robust membership from across Canada, but non-members interested in this particular topic could also sign up as new members to participate. While the Panel includes members from several parts of the agricultural industry, only farmers were invited to take part in this survey.

The FCC Vision survey was open from December 9th to 15th, 2019 and was sent to 2,035 panelists.[†] The survey had an 85% response rate with a total of 1,735 participants from across Canada and representing all agricultural sectors, regions, and other demographics (see Figures 6-11). The survey was designed to be concise with nine questions in order to target specific areas of interest to the research objectives. (The full survey question guide is provided in Appendix A).



A unique team of researchers and industry professionals was assembled to ensure the success of the survey.

In collaboration with Farm Management Canada, Farm Credit Canada led the survey design, distribution, and analysis through their cross-country Vision Panel membership.

[†] Thank you to our partners at Farm Credit Canada for providing analysis of survey results.

Who participated in the survey?

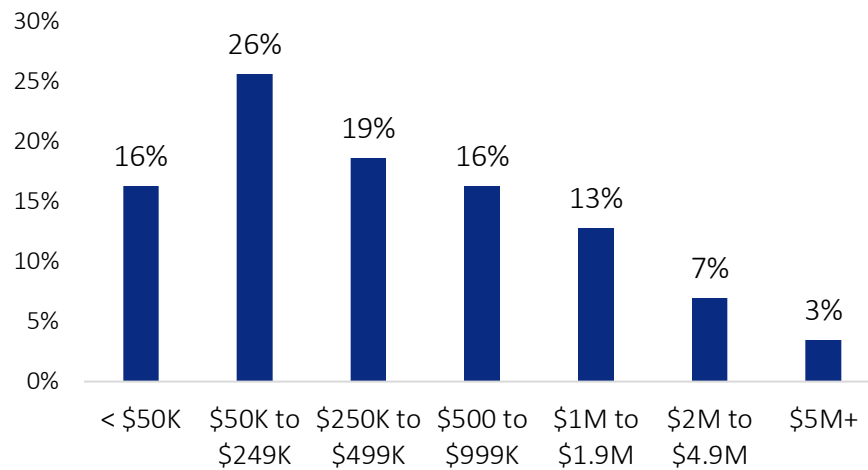


Figure 6: Survey respondents by farm income.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

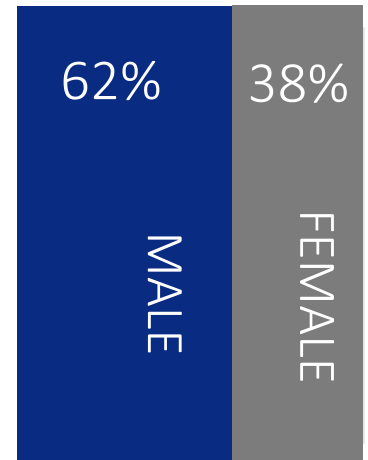


Figure 7: Survey respondents by gender identity.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Business Stage			
5%	41%	49%	5%
Starting out	Growth	Mature	Exit

Figure 9: Survey respondents by self-identified business stage.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Age	
18 to 24	2%
25 to 39	18%
40 to 59	45%
60 & older	35%

Figure 8: Survey respondents by age category.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

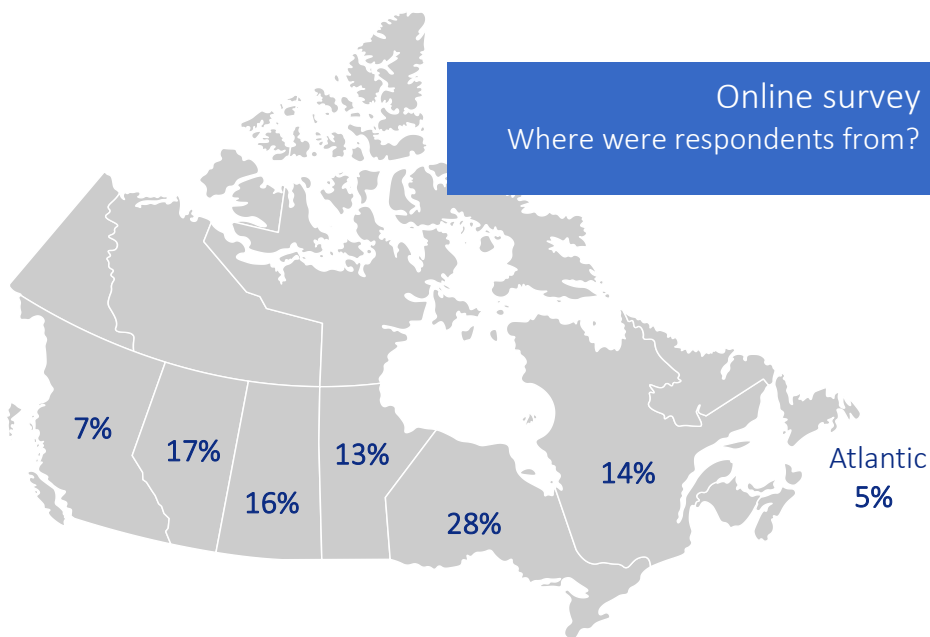


Figure 10: Survey respondents by farm location.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Role	
Primary decision maker	68%
Involved in decision making	25%
Support employee/retired	7%

Figure 11: Survey respondent by self-identified role on the farm.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

2.2 In-person Focus Groups: Sharing Insights Together

The first qualitative component of this study included focus groups with farmers and industry representatives across Canada. A total of 14 focus groups took place between October 2019 and March 2020. Groups included a cross section of production types, locations, and other demographics in order to examine similarities and differences in ways that farmers experience and manage the farm and their mental health. The Advisory Committee and research team identified potential focus groups and the list was continually refined as the research progressed. Recruitment invitations were sent through email by the research team and local partners.



Focus groups were chosen as a method because the social setting is a way of generating discussion among participants. For the focus groups with farmers, two activities were used to initiate discussion (found in Appendix B). The first activity asked about common stressors farmers are facing and about business practices they use to cope with those stresses. The second activity inquired about existing and potential mental health supports desired by farmers. The format and questions were adapted based on the individuals who comprised each group. For example, a focus group with agricultural college educators sought information about how existing curriculum addresses mental health, while a focus group with health professionals dealt more with current and potential public health and supports available for farmers.

Researchers took written notes during focus groups.[‡] Quotes were also extracted from the focus group notes to share farmers' personal experiences.

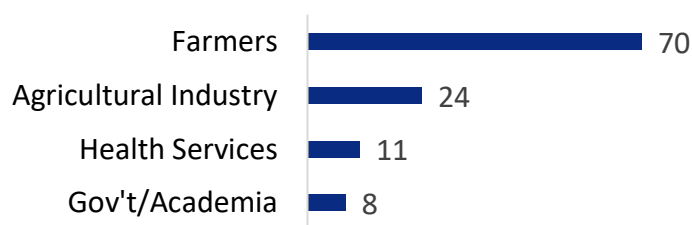


Figure 13. Focus group participants by affiliation.

Overview	
113	People
14	Focus Groups
5	Provinces

Figure 12. Overview of focus groups.

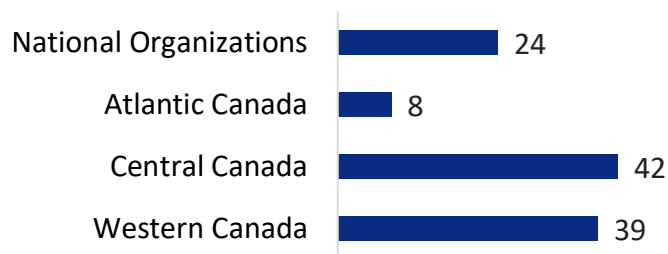


Figure 14. Focus group participants by region.

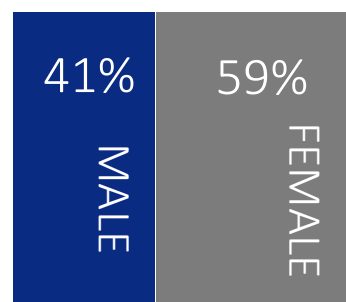
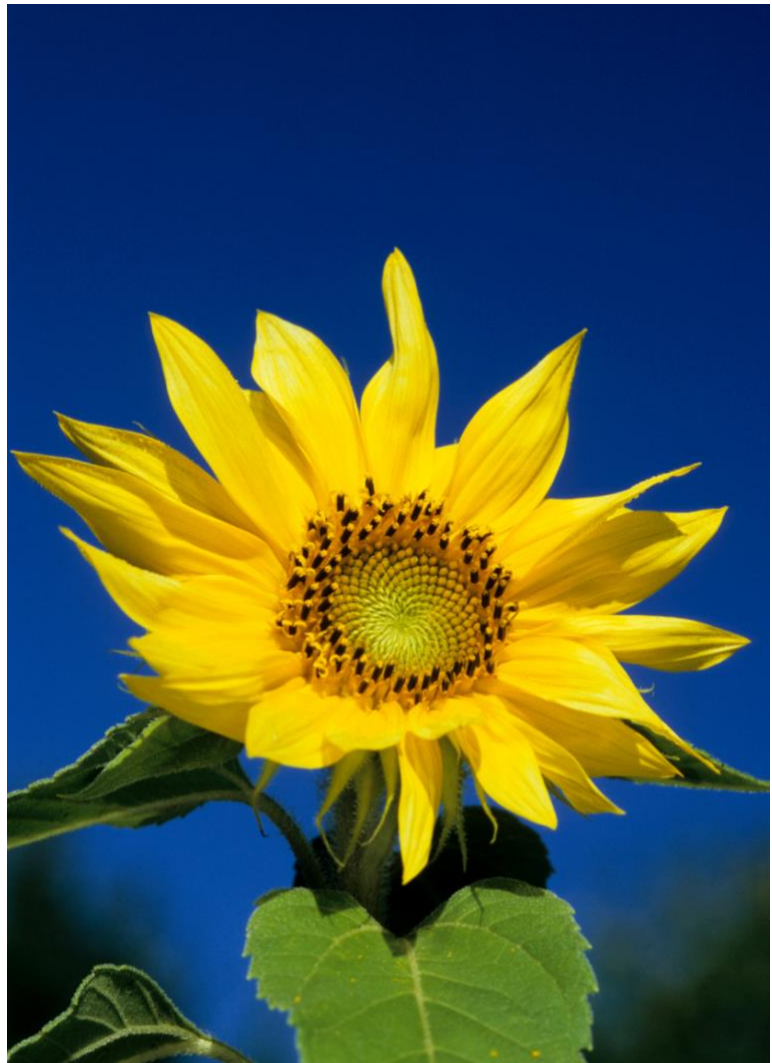


Figure 15. Focus group participant by gender identity.

[‡]Notes from focus groups, as well as interviews, were thematically organized (coded) using NVivo software (deductive thematic analysis). The themes used for this analysis were deductively developed through insights from the earlier environmental scan and insights gained during data collection.

2.3 In-depth Interviews: Making the Connections

Individual interviews comprised the second part of the qualitative research and were a valuable source of information from farmers and other agriculture sector stakeholders as well as mental health professionals. Identification and selection of potential interviewees was multi-faceted. A combination of personal expressions of interest and suggestions from the Advisory Committee helped to generate an initial list of stakeholders. Interviewees then suggested additional names to add to the list through a purposive sampling method. Based on the stakeholder list, potential interviewees were invited via email to participate. This approach resulted in an extensive interview process that included a wide breadth of interviewee engagement across Canada.



Semi-structured interview guides (found in Appendix C and Appendix D) were developed based on the environmental scan and discussions with the Advisory Committee and were used for all interviews. Interviews were conversational in order to allow interviewees to share their personal experiences and perspectives related to mental health. Interviews occurred between December 2019 and March 2020 and included 72 individuals, mostly over the phone.[§]

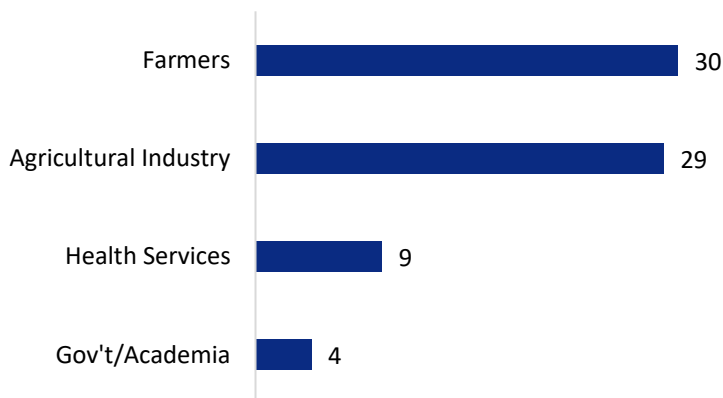


Figure 16. Interview participant by affiliation.

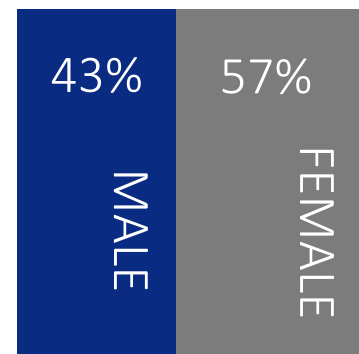


Figure 17. Interview participant by gender identity.

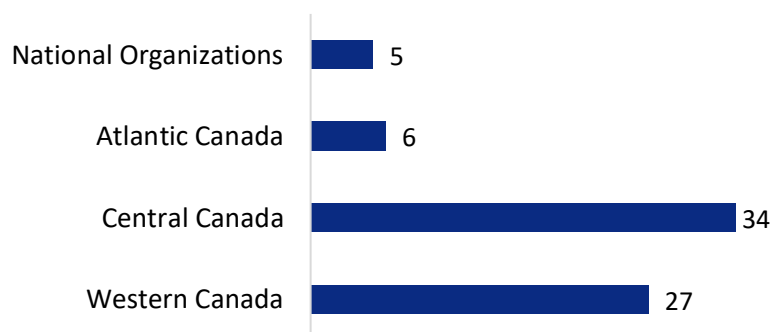


Figure 18. Interview participant by region.

Interview participants expressed gratitude towards participating in a project to enhance mental health supports.

[§] The same themes applied to focus group notes were used to code and organize interview notes using NVivo software.

3.0 Research Results

The research results presented in this section are based on integrated results of the three research methods: survey, focus groups, and interviews (see Section 2.0). All survey results are based on the FCC Vision Panel findings. These results have been integrated with the findings from the focus groups and interviews conducted by Wilton Consulting Group, and are presented within the following three categories:

- Stress and the Canadian farming population
- Connections between mental health and farm business management
- Effectiveness of support programs for Canadian farmers

SPOTLIGHTS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND FARM BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

The business management aspects of farming are related to mental health in many ways. Spotlights are placed throughout this section to offer insights into what this can look like for different farming groups and offer insights into how different groups have found success.

SPOTLIGHT



3.1 Stress and the Canadian Farming Population

Farmers are accustomed to variability in seasonality and shifts in markets. A consistent message, however, was that variability and unpredictability within the agricultural sector have increased in recent years, leading to higher levels of stress. These messages came through repeatedly in both the FCC Vision Panel survey and direct engagement with farmers. This section summarizes causes of stress for Canadian farmers and provides insights into the ways that stress impacts different demographic groups.

The FCC Vision Panel survey asked participants to indicate their stress ratings regarding the factors that are common stressors to the agriculture industry (eight in total). Responses could range from "not at all", indicating this is not considered to be a stress factor, to "a large extent."** A scorecard was created to categorize participants into one of three stress level profiles.

"If I have been working on my crop all season and then a freak hailstorm wipes it out, it's traumatic... It's like PTSD."

Grain and Oilseed Farmer, Western Canada

Farmers who tend to indicate higher stress with nearly all common stressors scored in the high stress range, whereas farmers who indicate higher stress with few common stressors in the agriculture industry scored as low stress (Table 1).



Table 1. Survey respondents' stress scores. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

High stress score	Mid stress score	Low stress score
14%	62%	24%

** In the Vision Panel survey, "to a large extent" indicated major stress factors at this time resulting in physiological changes such as sleep loss, changes in appetite, body/ headaches, etc.

Top stressors for Canadian farmers

The top three causes of stresses were reported as the agricultural industry's unpredictability (e.g., extreme weather, changes in markets), workload pressures, and financial pressures. Half of respondents (48%) also noted that public trust in Canadian agriculture was a moderate to large source of stress (e.g., pressure from advocacy groups related to animal welfare).

About 3 out of every 4 farmers indicate being moderately to highly stressed by these three factors:



Unpredictability (77%)



Workload Pressures (72%)



Financial Pressures (73%)





Unpredictability

Market unpredictability greatly complicates farm operations and business planning for farmers. In particular, 83% of farmers showing signs of high stress overall reported being highly stressed about this factor. When sudden changes lead to economic hardship, business plans can seem irrelevant, and it is important for planning resources to foresee potential pitfalls and design ways to respond to market volatility.

"The parameters in farming outside of my control became overwhelming. I'm a hog producer and the markets are extremely volatile. It's difficult to predict with any confidence where the business is going, where the cash flow is going. You can have a good business; you can manage it well and still encounter problems."

Farmer, Central Canada



Workload Pressures

Two thirds of farmers who rank in the high-stress score category indicated workload pressures as a large stress factor that results in physiological changes. These changes included sleep loss, changes in appetite, headaches, etc.

"I've seen enough stress that I'm not able to focus on getting tasks done. The accumulation builds up and it is tough to get to all jobs done. At times, the stress is there, especially during spring and fall, but it doesn't hit you until later."

Farmer, Atlantic Canada



Financial Pressures

8 out of 10 farmers who rank in the high-stress score category indicated financial pressures as a large stressor. Farmers who indicated frequently mitigating risk for their operation were less likely to feel stressed to a large extent about financial pressures.

"One thing we did to reduce risk and reduce my stress load was hire a private financial planner. When you're in dairy and you have quota, banks are pretty generous to give loans. I needed a third party to come in and plan it. We were told to cut our salaries in order to have cash flow. For me, I reduced a lot of risk by bringing that third-party planner in to balance the work life stuff."

Farmer, Central Canada

Beef farmers frequently named workload pressures, financial concerns, market unpredictability, and public trust as major stressors. They felt that their sector faces much public scrutiny, with criticism coming from activist groups. Some industry events have been targets for demonstrators, causing concern among beef farmers. Climate and certification policies often add costs to beef production and reduce the global competitiveness of Canadian beef.²⁶ Beef production also faces concerns from outbreaks of tuberculosis²⁷ and from diseases that may move into Canada.²⁸ All of these concerns weigh on farmers' minds and can negatively impact mental health. Beef farmers in Western Canada also spoke of isolation as a major factor, given the distances between individual towns and between farms and towns where resources may be.

Hog producers also discussed numerous stressors in their industry. Pork is sold at a price determined by the market and can quickly fluctuate over time. Hog producers sometimes sell products below the cost of production to try to ease pressure from financial institutions. However, producers said that this rash decision making contributes negatively to their mental health. Farmers rely on national infrastructure like rail lines and highways to get products to market, and delays can create financial losses. Producers may feel powerless to change their farm outcomes but still feel responsible for their family, workers, and business.

"The [hog] industry is one that needs set goals, financial management goals. But plans like 3-month, 1-year, or 5-year plans make it difficult because of volatility."

Hog Producer, Central Canada

Disease outbreaks like the porcine epidemic diarrhea (PED) virus have impacted some farms, while diseases like African Swine Fever remain in farmers' minds despite no confirmed cases in Canada.²⁹ Public perception can also shift due to diseases or even misinformation, reducing demand for pork products. While these may create financial losses for producers, many producers also shared that euthanizing animals due to disease takes a great mental toll.

Workload pressures are not unique to livestock producers. Horticulture as well as grains and oilseeds farmers also find difficulties accessing mental health support in addition to getting through their day-to-day of their operations. As one grain and oilseed farmer observed, "The people who are really downtrodden aren't going to farm conferences and aren't on social media. How do you get to those people?"

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Social media can help in changing the conversation around mental health. Mental health social media campaigns are not unique to farming, as movements such as Bell Let's Talk and organizations such as Do More Agriculture have a national reach. With social media, farmers can share their personal stories in an effort to reduce stigma.

Farmers use social networks to share resources and advice with peers and the general public. This is where use of social media also has drawbacks, as public scrutiny is a common source of stress for farmers.^{30,31} In the FCC Vision Panel Survey on Mental Health, 48% of farmers reported public trust as a stress factor to a moderate or large extent, and adherence to farm business management practices did not impact this perception.

"If you have had an animal disease or if activists invade your farm, those are traumatic events and can have a huge impact on the farm family."

Farmer, Central Canada

Public scrutiny of farmers can often manifest online.³² Farmers may hesitate to engage in online mental health campaigns, as they may encounter threats and attacks from persons outside of the agricultural sector. What is intended to be a safe outlet for farm stories can be turned against the farmer and can become another stressor. Harassment can cause great stress when a farmer's name and farm location are publicly shared online. The pressure from public trust is significant for farmers.

If farmers feel safe when sharing their farming stories and their mental health struggles, their discussions can continue to reduce mental health stigma.

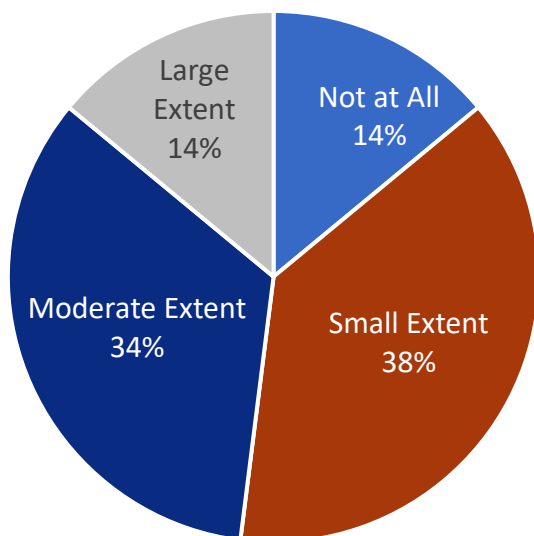


Figure 19. Extent to which "public trust" is a stressor for farmers.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Coping Strategies

When farmers experience stress, they may react in different (and even contradictory) ways. They can engage in certain behaviours to a greater or lesser extent to avoid new sources of stress or to try to regain control over their situation. This can impact day-to-day farm operations, as research links stress to decreased concentration, poor decision making, and a loss of engagement and interest, which can all have negative impacts on productivity.³³ Figure 20 lists the FCC Vision Panel survey results for changes in farmer behaviour when under a great deal of stress.

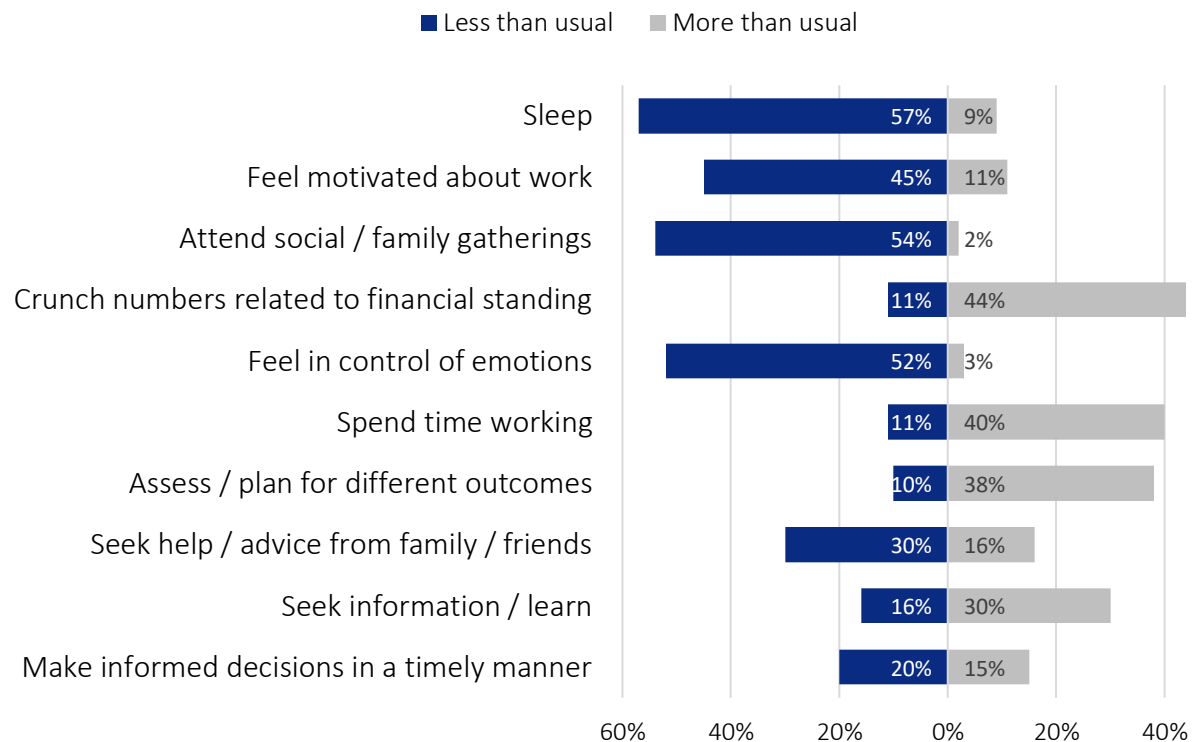


Figure 20. Percentages of farmers reporting increases and decreases in listed behaviours when under a great deal of stress.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

According to the results of the FCC Vision Panel survey, many farmers reported certain behavioural changes when under a great deal of stress. These coping behaviours can have positive or negative impacts for farmers. For instance, farmers tended to lose sleep (57%), attend social or family gatherings less (54%), and feel less in control of their emotions (52%). However, they also tended to practice certain behaviours more in an attempt to cope, including focusing more on financial numbers (44%), spending more time working (40%), and assessing or planning for possible outcomes (38%). Some interviewees noted that stress can also drive farmers to alcohol and substance abuse in order to cope with their struggles.

There was a fairly even divide between farmers who reported that stress decreased their ability to make timely and informed decisions (20%) and those for whom it increased their ability to do so (15%). Farmers who frequently apply business management practices are more likely than those who do not to adopt positive coping strategies when under a great deal of stress. This affirms that stress can be a positive motivator (as seen in the stress curve in Figure 2), especially when proactive actions are taken.

"We are building these entrepreneurs who are very isolated, and they tend to experience things like burnout, and they are resilient people in their day-to-day jobs."

Focus Group Participant



For all of the listed behaviours, farmers with low stress were the most likely to not change their behaviour in stressful times. This demonstrates the tendency for stress to impact farmers' conduct. Given the importance of factors like sleep and social interaction to personal well-being and interpersonal relations with family, employees and support providers, this also shows how coping mechanisms can create business challenges.

"A lot of times, farmers will get together in the winter, and they will have breakfast together...sometimes it's good to get away from being alone with your own thoughts, and you get to share things that have gone wrong."

Focus Group Participant



FARM SAFETY

Mental health challenges can reduce the ability to focus and make decisions, and this can cause accidents on farms. A common concern is that decreased mental health can cause sleep deprivation which is a known factor in farm accidents. This increase in accidents can be particularly dangerous when working with large animals or heavy equipment.

Farmers may delay introducing safety measures onto their farm due to the impact of stress on decision making. Interviewees commented that farmers may delay making investments in up-to-date equipment or in repairing old equipment due to a lack of proper planning. Interviewees also noted that safety was often the first thing to be overlooked in times of financial pressure, as farmers prioritize the welfare of their animals and getting crops off the field before allocating resources to themselves.

“Those business choices that are made in a state of poor mental health, you’re thinking short-term, not long-term, in terms of safety. When it comes to new workers you need to train them properly, because you want a good product in terms of straight corn rows and things like that, but it’s also for the safety of the employee and making a good working environment.”

– Farmer, Western Canada

Farm safety incidents can also impact mental health. Farmers who experience accidents may not handle injuries well and may be at risk of falling into depression. Farmers’ identity may be impacted if injuries lead to disability or an inability to do farm work as before.

“I know someone who had all of their crops in the field still and he had an accident, and he wasn’t able to do their own cropping. It took a toll because they are independent and used to doing things on their own, then they have to worry about the financial impact on how to pay that person. Everything is so intertwined.”

– Mental Health Worker, Central Canada

Family and interpersonal relations

Canadian farms continue to change with time, but the farm family remains an essential component and strength of the majority of farm businesses. Most recent Canadian data indicates that 84% of spouses participate in farm management, 76% of spouses share ownership, and 28% of on-farm employees are also family members.^{34,35} Interviewees noted that the families that run these businesses often deal with a complex set of emotions related to family legacy. While there is often a sense of heritage and pride, there can also be intense stress, as farmers may worry about losing a farm that has been in the family for generations. Losing this legacy, including the land that you have raised your own family on, can have negative impacts on mental health and decision-making ability.

In addition, boundaries between the business and family sides of the farm may be ambiguous. Aspects like the division of jobs may be very informal, and relatives may have different expectations for each other that are neither clarified nor written down. This can cause conflict within families that weakens the ability to make rational decisions.

During interviews, participants frequently commented on the fact that farm businesses rely heavily on family involvement and how this close interdependency can cause challenges for spouses and children. Stress that is impacting the primary farm decision maker often impacts spouses as well, as they may feel helpless as they watch loved ones affected by adverse mental health and they may bear the brunt of behavioural changes resulting from high stress levels. Some participants noted that spouses can provide emotional support, but that there is often a limit to their ability to help due to a lack of professional mental health training.

"I'm pretty fortunate because my husband has a different personality and is able to be really supportive. When one of us is down, the other can help them rise up. When your gas tank is empty, there's someone who can give you that push that you need."

Farmer, Central Canada



3.2 How Stress is Experienced by Different Demographic Groups

The FCC Vision Panel survey identified several demographic differences across the Canadian farming population. In particular, the ways that stress is experienced by women and young farmers are described in this section.

Men reluctant to reach out for mental health support

Society has tended to see farmers as predominantly men, and to see men as having outward emotions to a lesser extent than women. These societal pressures create challenges for farmer mental health and for programs aiming to address related issues. These pressures impact both men and women, though in different ways.

Men often experience a strong stigma against speaking about mental health, including both “public stigma” and “self-stigma.”³⁶ Due to a desire to demonstrate strength and success, they may avoid discussing or revealing issues that they feel may show weakness. Although this is beginning to change, findings show there is still stigma preventing men (and to a lesser extent, women) from reaching out for help. Men related these personal experiences in interviews, while women in interviews also noted observing this behaviour in men. Some participants mentioned stigma as a larger factor for men than women in certain industries, such as beef farming.



"It's bred into men to be stoic and strong. They lean into their wife and the women have to carry that stress as well as their own."

Farmer, Western Canada

Attitudes among men
about being stoic and
self-sufficient are
prevalent

"Often the attitude is to get back to work and pull yourself up, to work through pain. We're notorious for fracturing our leg and getting back to work faster in the ag sector. It's that stoicism, that's what it is to be a farmer. So, it seems like a weakness so I shouldn't go for help."

"I grew up on the farm, and was taught the adages to suck it up buttercup, cowboy up, be a man."

"Stoicism often doesn't allow us to share our failures."



Women more likely to report high stress

Women reported high and medium stress more often than men (Table 2). Women were more likely than men to report high stress due to finances, workload, industry unpredictability, family conflict, and farm transition. Further, with respect to the ways that they respond when under a great deal of stress, women were more likely than men to report changes in their actions (Figure 21).

Table 2. National survey respondents by gender and stress profile. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

	High stress score	Mid stress score	Low stress score
Men	12%	60%	28%
Women	17%	65%	18%

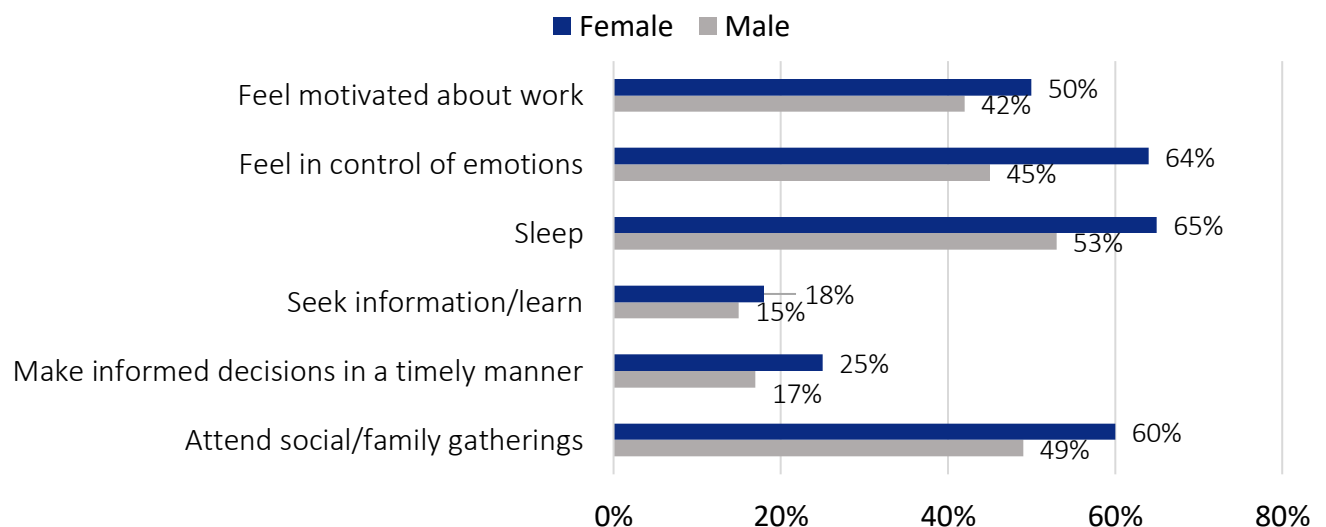


Figure 21. Percentages of male and female farmers who answered “Less than usual” to the question, “When I am under a great deal of stress, I... [less than usual | to the same extent | more than usual].”

Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Women spoke of the challenges of working in what is still seen as a male dominated industry. They can feel pressure to “prove themselves” as women in agriculture and to avoid showing signs of “weakness.” Some research shows that women tend to have higher levels of risk aversion,³⁷ and one interviewee noted that some women may experience more stress due to this fact coupled with the high risk involved in farming.

Focus group participants noted that while the lack of childcare and parental leave for farmers creates complications for all farmers, this stress is more pronounced for women. As well, there is a continuing perception that women’s contributions to multiple aspects of farm management are often under-valued.

Programming aimed at addressing farmer mental health and farm business management needs to be aware of these nuances. It is important to recognize that supports for men’s and women’s mental health may need to be tailored differently. Supporting farmers in their business management also requires a wider view that looks for ways to reduce stress for women, including the lack of family services and parental leave.

“As a farm wife, it falls on me when a kid is sick, or when someone needs picked up from school . . . Not that I would have it any other way. Our kids are the most important thing to us, but you think you have your day planned and when that changes it adds stress”

Farmer, Western Canada

“I do a lot of the industry stuff for our broiler operation. I try to get involved more, but it is very “men make the decisions,” and when you get a woman involved they don’t want a strong woman to be involved. It’s a very male-dominant role.”

Farmer, Central Canada



Younger farmers are more stressed

Farmers 60 years old and older responding to the FCC Vision Panel survey reported relatively low stress, compared to their younger counterparts (Table 3).

Table 3. National survey respondents by age group and stress profile. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Age Group	High stress score	Mid stress score	Low stress score
Under 40	17%	65%	18%
40-59	13%	65%	23%
60+	13%	58%	29%

Financial and workload pressures created high stress more often for farmers under 60, while stress from industry volatility was most prevalent among farmers over the age of 40. Farmers under 40 were also most likely to report high stress due to farm transition and family conflict (Table 4).

The FCC Vision Panel survey also assessed stress factors related to family and interpersonal issues based on whether respondents were the primary decision maker for a farm, involved in decision making, or present in a supporting or retired capacity. High stress was more common among those involved in decision making, while low stress was more common among primary decision makers. Persons involved in decision making were also more likely than primary decision makers to be highly stressed by farm transition issues and interpersonal conflicts with family members.

Table 4. National survey respondents who indicate they are highly stressed with given factors, resulting in physiological symptoms. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Factor	Under 40 years	40-59 years	60+ years
Farm transition considerations	17%	10%	13%
Interpersonal conflict with family	19%	14%	9%

Younger farmers are less effective at coping with stress compared to older farmers

The younger group of farmers surveyed were more likely to report reducing several behaviours due to stress, as shown in Figure 22. For example, 66% of farmers under 40 said they slept less than usual when under a great deal of stress, and 59% said this made them less likely to attend social or family gatherings. This is a cause for concern since these changes in behaviour may further impact the mental health of young farmers and leave them ill-equipped to manage their farm. Compared to those 60 and older, farmers under 40 indicate that they are less likely to adopt positive coping strategies when under a great deal of stress. This includes seeking information and making informed decisions in a timely manner. These results demonstrate that young farmers in particular may benefit from additional business support.

Farmers under 40 are more likely to change their behaviour when under a great deal of stress, and not necessarily for the better.

Farmers 60 & older are more likely to indicate no change in their usual behaviour to cope with stressful periods.

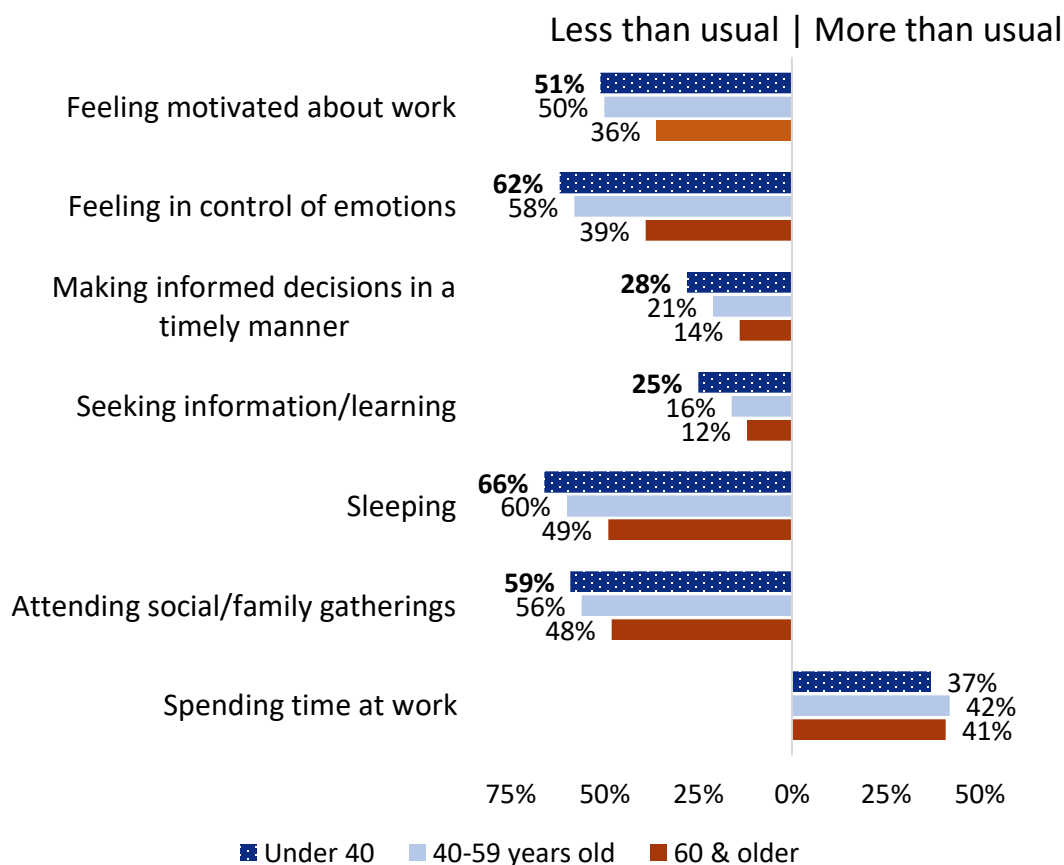


Figure 22. Self-identified behavioural changes during periods of high stress, by age group. Statistically significant results shown in bold. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

TRANSITION PLANNING

Transitioning a farm to the next generation or new owners is a common concern among farmers,³⁸ and it can often become a stressor. This is especially true when each generation has different goals and expectations for the short and long term. Older generations, looking ahead to retirement, may tend to prioritize the farm's present cashflow over other concerns. In comparison, younger generations may look to invest in new technologies, which can require taking on large amounts of debt.

Primary decision makers have a 10% likelihood to be highly stressed by farm transition considerations. Others in the operation who are involved in decision-making have a 17% chance of being highly stressed. (FCC Vision Panel)

Older farmers may also see their farm as a key part of their identity and may hesitate to proactively plan how to transition out of being the primary decision maker. They may fear a loss of purpose and may hold on to control at a time when the next generation needs to learn how to run the farm business. Necessary conversations may be delayed, leading to conflict, resentment, and increased stress.

Tense discussions around farm transitions can disrupt relationships among family members and can lead to feelings of frustration or isolation, which can impact farmer mental health. There may also be a cultural expectation for children to take over a farm business despite not having a strong interest in the work. The next generation may want to pursue other careers (or simply other forms of agriculture) but feel pressured to remain on the farm for the sake of their parents.³⁹ This may lead to a lack of enthusiasm or to open conflict within families.

"When dealing with stress, not only are you running a business, you're dealing with your family. While this is great because of the history and culture, you are also dealing with family expectations. Not only is your job in jeopardy, but also your family's blood, sweat, and tears; it adds a tremendous amount of pressure."

— Farmer, Western Canada

It is important to promote farm transition resources to farmers, especially in remote areas where farmers may be unaware of what is available. Some transition mediation services are directed to farm families while others have a broader scope of connecting business sellers and buyers.⁴⁰ Multiple interviewees noted that having these third-party resources helped to reduce stress. However, family members may be unaware of these resources or see this as a matter that should stay within the family. The key is to foster discussions around farm futures and help to develop proactive plans that address the needs of all family members.

Growing operations more stressed with finances than mature operations

Farmers with growing or expanding businesses (including new entrants) show higher levels of stress in general than mature operations (Table 5). They were slightly more likely to show signs of mid levels of stress, while mature businesses were more likely to report low stress.

Table 5. National survey respondents by stress profile and business stage. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Business stage	High stress score	Mid stress score	Low stress score
Growing/Expanding	14%	66%	20%
Mature	13%	60%	27%

In times of great stress, those in growing operations were more likely to report feeling less motivated about work and less in control of their emotions (Figure 23). They also reported sleeping less and attending fewer social gatherings in comparison to those with mature farm businesses. Those in growing or expanding businesses appear to have more trouble coping with the stressors that their work creates for them.

In order to better understand how to provide support to farmers in growing or expanding businesses, it is important to consider the causes of their stress.

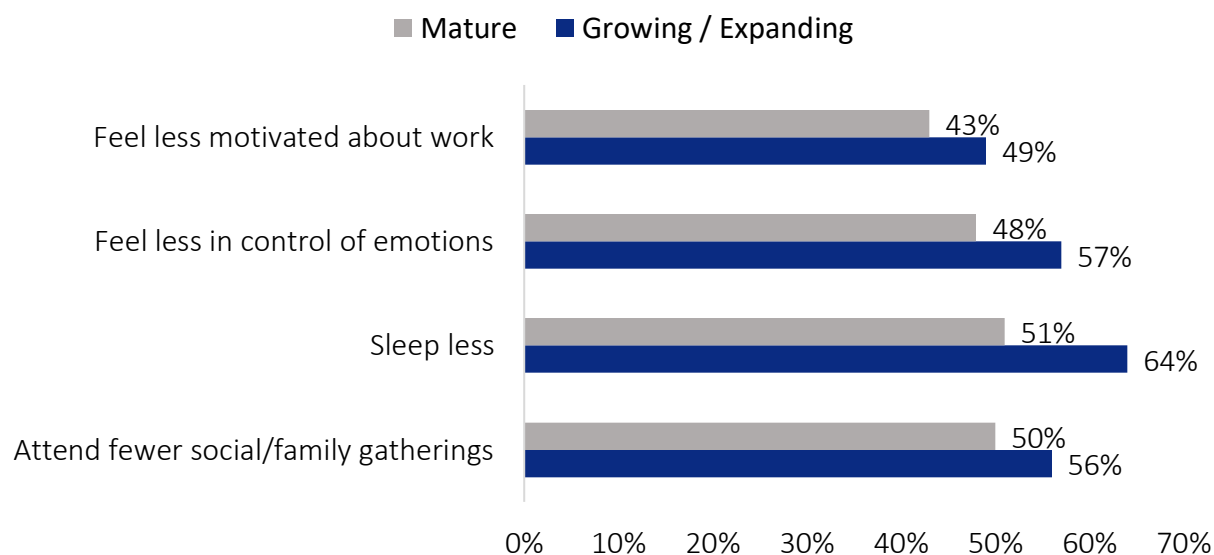


Figure 23. Percentages of farmers by business stage who responded "Less than usual" to the question, "When I am under a great deal of stress, I ... [less than usual | to the same extent | more than usual]."

Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

SMALL FARMS AND NEW ENTRANTS

Small farms are encountering challenges due to the increasing cost of farming and decreasing profit margins. In addition to financial pressures, interviewees noted they must also spend time managing employees, cash flows, and other business-related items that they may not have expected as part of farm life. Farmers commented that trying to meet all of these business needs while still succeeding at farming made them feel as though they are being stretched too thin. Instead of spending their time farming, they need to deal with the paperwork and administration associated with farm business management.

"With the growth of farms, there is a changing role from being a farmer to a human resources manager. There's stress with paperwork, policy, forms, administration. Most farmers didn't aspire to that lifestyle and it's a hard transition. They aspired to being outside and producing food from the land."

– Agricultural Association Staff, Central Canada

When the stress of trying to manage these new business requirements becomes overwhelming, farmers said they start to avoid some aspects of the business. Not all farmers feel that they have the financial capability to hire financial advisors or other consultants to help manage the business side of farming. Without these management practices, it may be harder for farmers to take on debt, for example, which may be required to grow, and this cycle can be a constant stressor for farmers.



3.3 Optimism Amongst Canadian Farmers

It is beneficial to distinguish between stressors and stress. Stressors are the external factors that impact farming and farmers. Stress is the personal, emotional response to those external factors. While the previous section provided insights into the causes and extent of stress for farmers, this section delves deeper into farmer responses to stressors by looking at levels of optimism.

The FCC Vision Panel survey examined levels of optimism among its participants and categorized farmers as having low, moderate, or high optimism based on their responses. Nearly half of respondents (49%) had moderate optimism, while over a third (37%) had low optimism and relatively few (14%) had high optimism. As expected, farmers with high optimism reported lower stress, although the causal relationship between these two factors is unknown.

Across Canada's provinces, optimism was highest in British Columbia and Quebec compared to other provinces. In terms of commodity groups, 42% of livestock producers and 38% of grain and other crop producers have low optimism. Specifically, beef producers are more likely (45%) to have lower optimism than most other producers, followed by grains and oilseeds (38%) and hogs/other animals (35%). It is important to note how to interpret this analysis and comparison. Since the FCC Vision Panel was conducted in December 2019, these figures should be considered as a reflection of conditions across Canada at that time, as opposed to long-term realities.

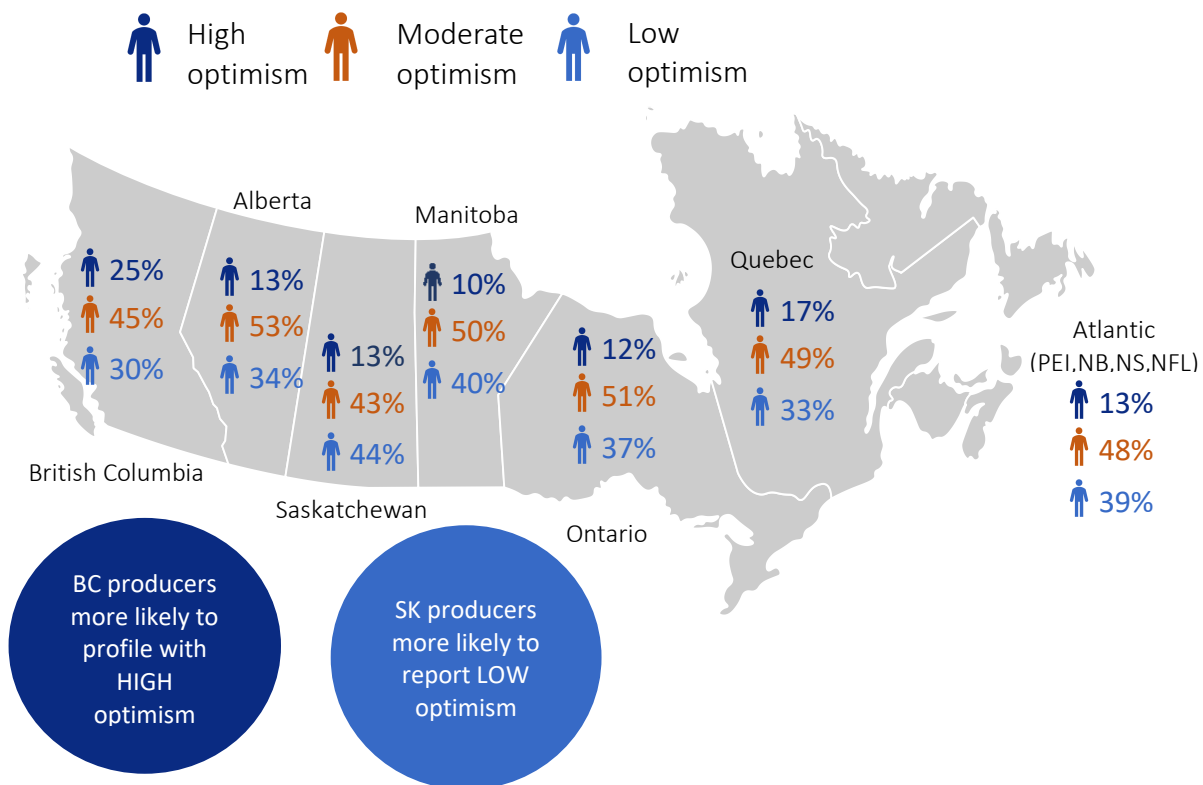


Figure 24. Level of optimism by province.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Optimism and behaviour changes

As with stress, farmers showed different behavioural changes based on their levels of optimism. Farmers with low optimism showed much less consistent behaviour in several categories (Figure 25) than farmers with high optimism. Compared to farmers with high optimism, those with low optimism were less likely to maintain their emotional stability, sleep the same amount, or attend social gatherings as usual.

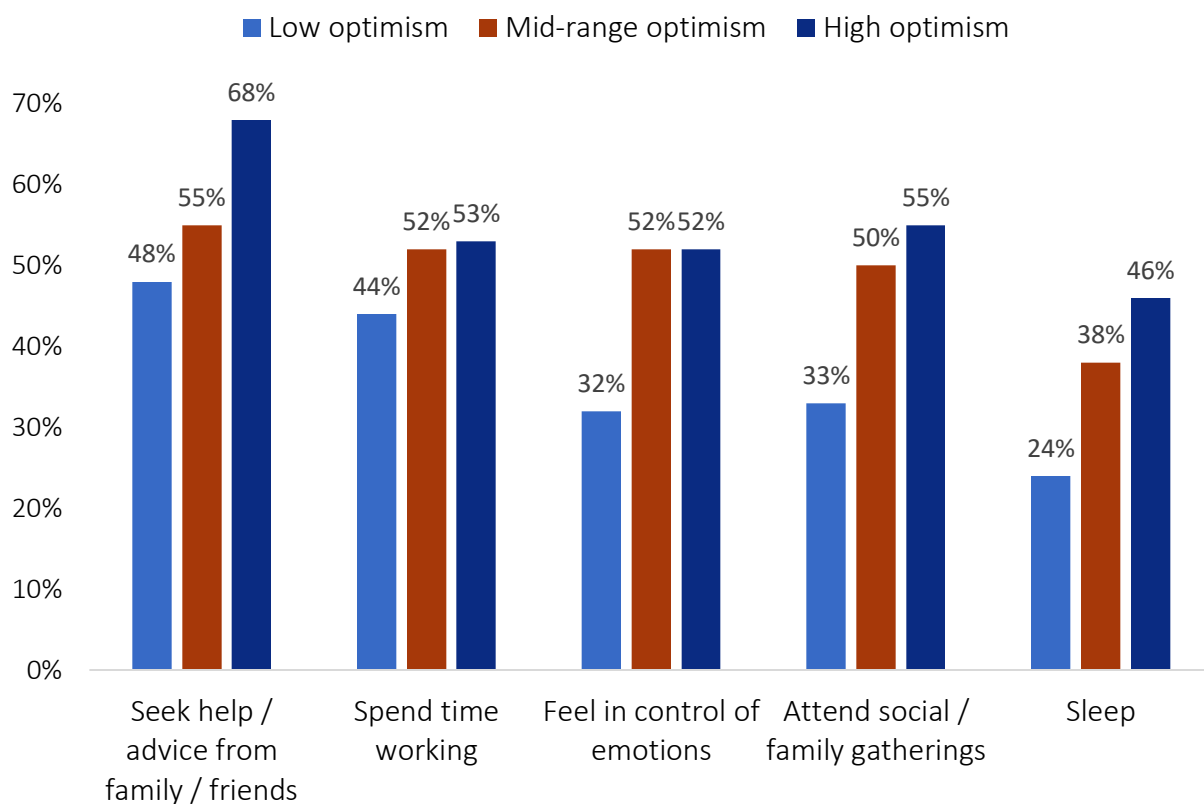


Figure 25. Percentages of farmers who report engaging in listed behaviours to the same extent as usual when under a great deal of stress, by optimism profile.

Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Farmers who identify with an optimistic mindset are more likely than farmers with low optimism to frequently do key business management practices. These practices include keeping records up to date, consulting with others, mitigating risk, seeking training, adhering to a budget, and following a written business plan. Farmers with high optimism are also more likely to have consistent behaviour when under a great deal of stress. Farmers who identified with low optimism were less likely to follow health and safety standards, putting themselves at risk of injury.

3.4 The Connection Between Mental Health and Farm Business Management

Common farm business practices

Farm business management involves taking a strategic and proactive approach to managing people, finances, and natural resources. These practices can include:

- Keeping records up to date
- Consulting with others
- Mitigating risk
- Following health and safety standards
- Monitoring markets
- Seeking training/knowledge
- Adhering to a budget
- Communicating about the future of the operation
- Benchmarking performance
- Anticipating current/future hiring needs
- Encouraging employee uptake of a wellness program
- Following a written business plan

More than 7 out of 10 farmers indicate they:

keep records up to date

consult with others when unsure about something

mitigate risk

follow health and safety standards

monitor markets

Survey results indicate that business management practices that are done frequently by more than 70% of farmers include keeping records up to date, consulting with others when unsure about something, mitigating risk, following health and safety standards, and monitoring markets.



Following a written business plan, however, is less common, with only 21% of farmers indicating they regularly follow a written business plan, and 48% indicating they never or rarely do (Figure 26). Interview and focus group participants explained that it is most common to write out business plans when they are required for loans, applying to cost share programs, or other financial transactions. In other words, written planning is often in response to requirements imposed by outside agencies.

Comments from farmers who create written plans are that they find that formalizing business operations helps with communication amongst family members. Business management practices are also seen as important for farm outcomes and stress management. A recommendation among this group was to make business skills workshops more accessible in rural areas to accommodate for their time limitations. They also emphasized the importance of presenting materials in plain language.

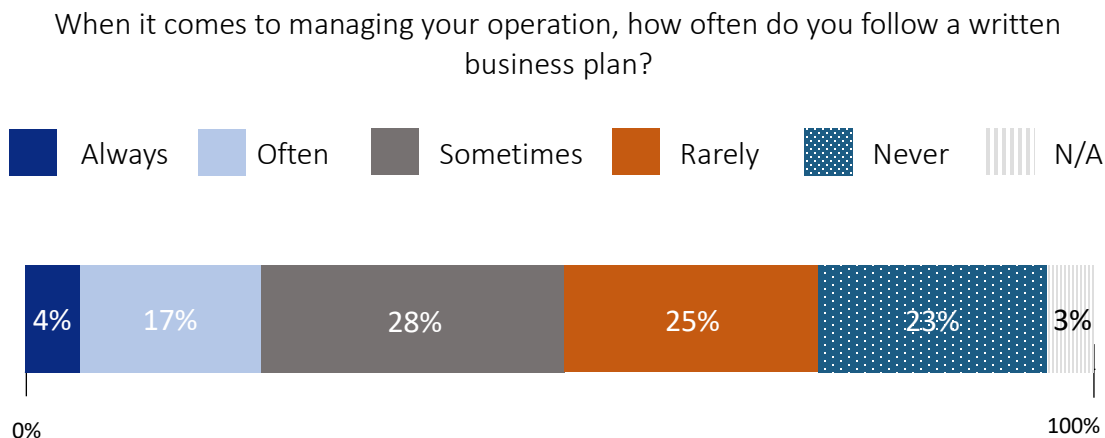


Figure 26. Survey participants who follow a written business plan.

Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Why farmers choose not to create and/or follow a written business plan

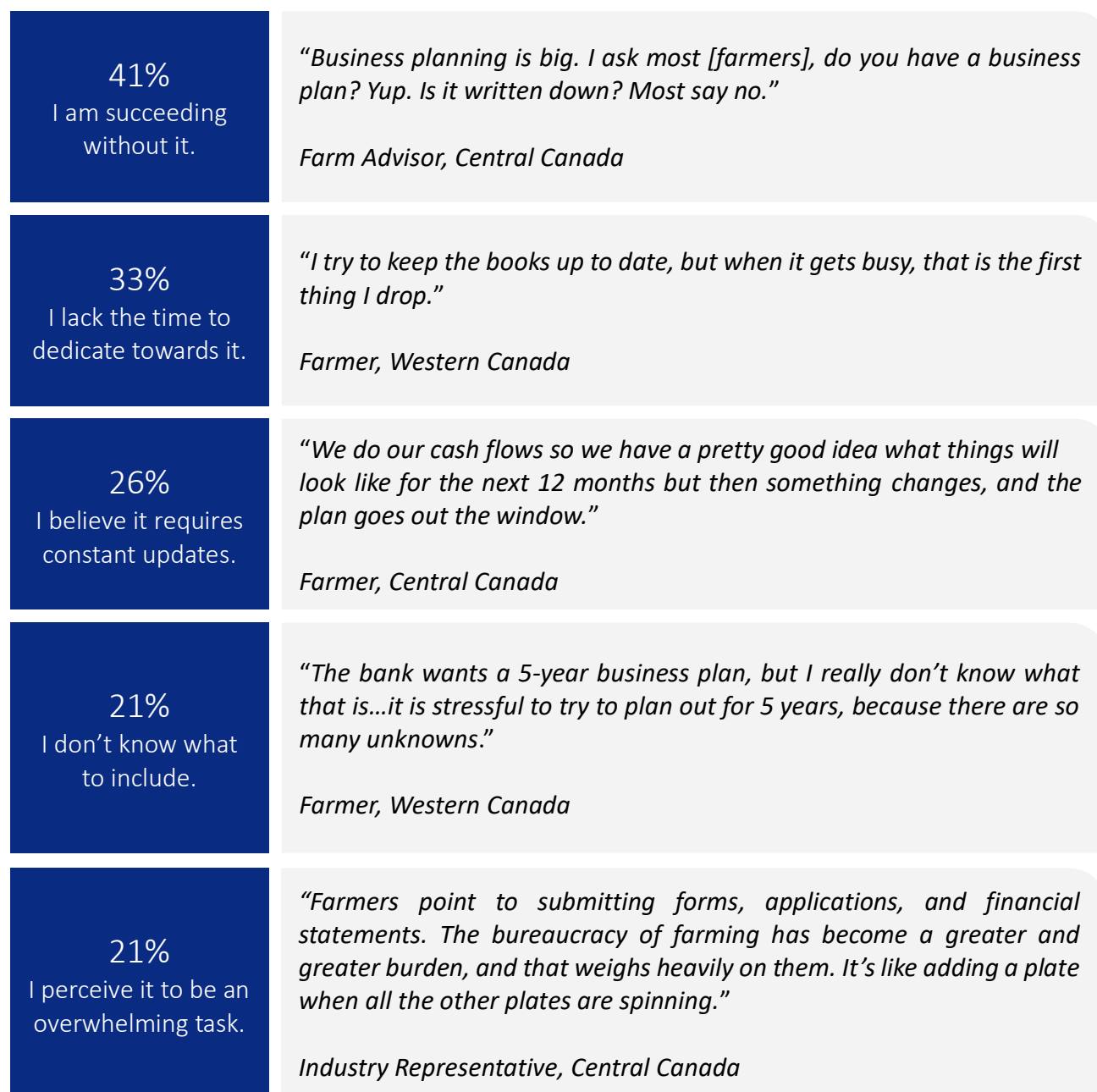


Figure 27. Reasons why respondents do not follow a written business plan. Note: Respondents could select multiple answers.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Business management practices are less frequent with younger generation

Farm business management practices vary by age group. Farmers under 40 years of age are more likely than older age groups to seek out training or knowledge, or to consult with others when unsure about something. On the other hand, this age group can also find that, due to growing operations and family commitments, it can be difficult to find time to leave the farm to attend events and participate in associations. The older group of farmers (60+ years old) were the most likely to report keeping up-to-date records, mitigating risk when able, following health and safety standards, and to monitor markets (Table 6). This age group was also the most likely to report openly communicating about their farm's future with those involved.

Farmers under 40 years of age are more likely to consult with others and seek training/knowledge than older age groups.

These figures suggest that young farmers are less likely than older farmers to engage in business management practices that may contribute to farm success. However, they also suggest that younger farmers are particularly willing to receive support and confer with others. There appears to be an opportunity to provide resources that will better support young farmers in their business management practices and help increase their ability to manage stress and overall mental health.

Table 6. Business management practices by age group.

Statistically significant results shown in bold. Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Percent of respondents who report...	Under 40	40-59	60 & older
Consulting with others when unsure	86	81	79
Seeking training/knowledge	68	59	60
Keeping records updated	82	87	89
Mitigating risk to best ability	75	78	82
Following health/safety standards	67	77	80
Monitoring markets	71	71	78
Openly communicating about operation's future with those involved	55	51	60

Managing stress through business planning

Employing business management practices can help farmers get through tough times such as market crashes or crop failures. Among farmers who use written business plans, 88% claim that it has contributed to peace of mind. Tracking progress and finances through written business plans in particular are helpful. Furthermore, following a written business plan can help farmers feel more motivated about their work when under a great deal of stress. By putting plans in writing, farmers and their farm teams have a reference point in times of uncertainty. This helps to give clarity in uncertain stressful situations, providing a “light at the end of the tunnel.” However, the focus groups and interviews revealed that some farmers perceive that in order to complete a business plan they need to predict the future or that there is no value in having a plan because they know that there will be changes that are out of their control.

To what extent does having/following your written business plan contribute to your peace-of-mind regarding your operation?

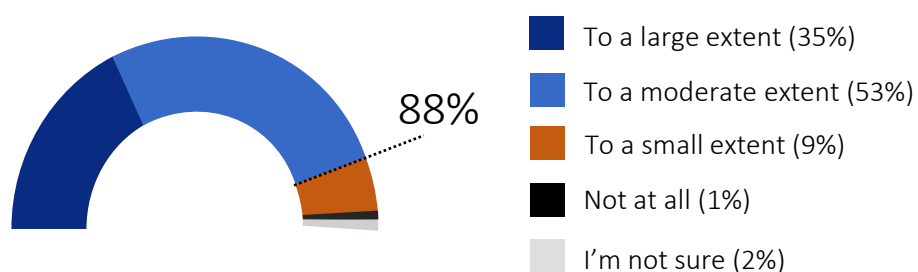


Figure 28. Extent to which following a written business plan contributes to peace of mind.

Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

"It helps to know where we want to go. That way, difficult years don't seem so devastating; there is a plan in place to move forward and a vision of the future."

Farmer, Western Canada

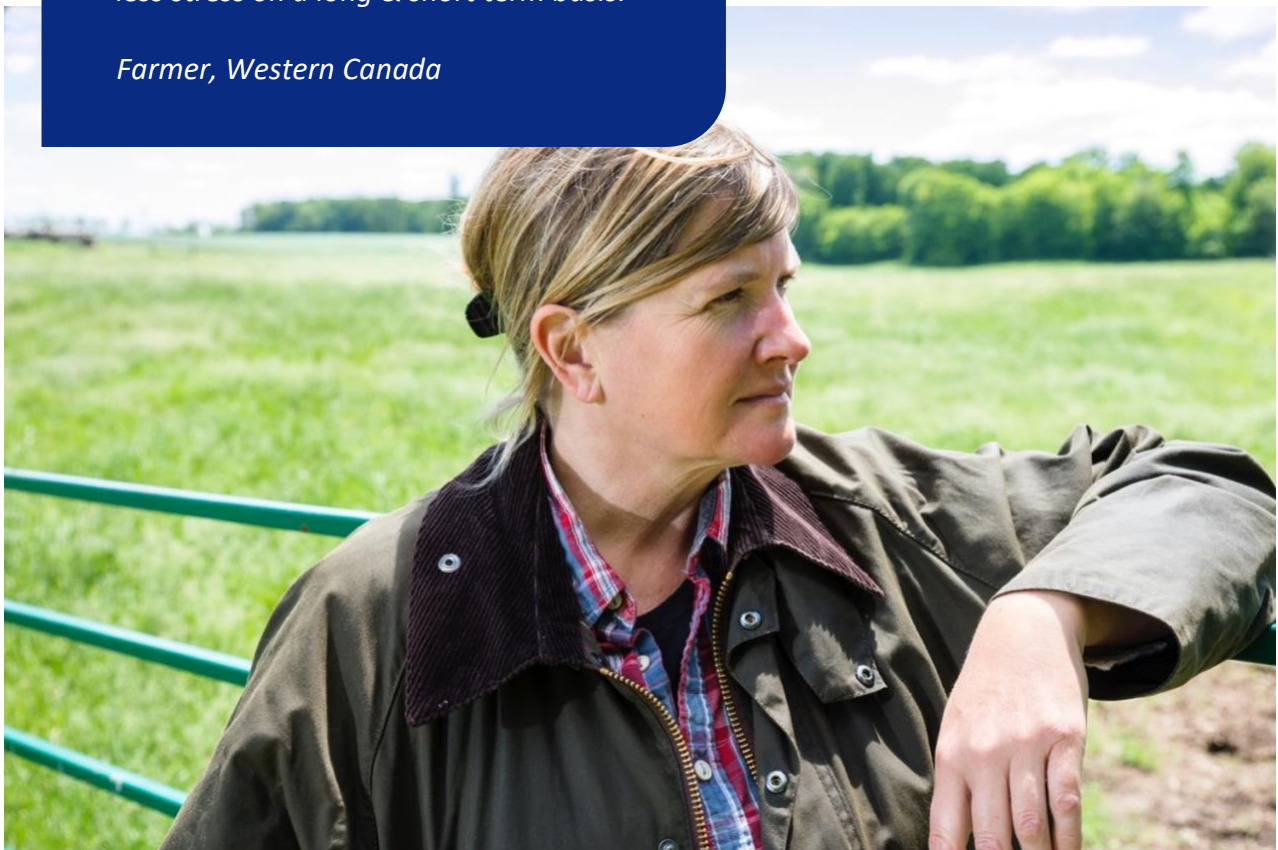
Interview and focus group results echoed these findings. Participants noted that having a clear vision of the future was often beneficial for farmer mental health and farm business management. In particular, interviewees saw well-developed business plans and succession plans as being helpful for assessing the future and setting one's mind at ease.

88% of farmers who follow a written business plan say it has contributed to their peace of mind.

77% of farmers who do not follow a written business plan believe that it would give them peace of mind.

"The business plan anticipates the needs so I'm able to be ahead of the game instead of reactionary. Eliminates a lot of crisis management issues and then I have less stress on a long & short term basis."

Farmer, Western Canada



Farmers who follow a written business plan also indicate frequently adhering to other business management activities (Table 7). Notable differences are that farmers who follow a business plan are more likely to adhere to a budget, benchmark performance, seek training, and communicate about the future of the farm with those impacted.

Table 7. Business management activities frequently adhered to by those who follow a written business plan.
Source: FCC Vision Panel Survey (2019).

Business Management Activity	Regularly (Often/Always) Follow a Written Business Plan	Never/Rarely/Sometimes Follow a Written Business Plan
Keeping records up to date	94%	85%
Consulting with others when unsure about something	89%	79%
Mitigating risk to the best of their ability	87%	77%
Following health and safety standards	84%	74%
Adhering to a budget	80%	49%
Monitoring markets	80%	72%
Seeking training/knowledge	73%	58%
Openly communicate about the future of the farm with those impacted	73%	50%
Benchmarking performance	65%	38%

Hog producers spoke of the challenges of creating business plans due to the long-term unpredictability of prices, which could lead to further financial stress and mental health challenges. In addition, price fluctuations can cause producers to take on greater amounts of debt in the hopes of reversing past losses.

"I found that one thing would happen in the market that would make a quarter million difference in your cash flow. It was something that you couldn't change, and I couldn't find a way to make it better. So that put me into a pretty dark spot."

Hog Producer, Central Canada

Business management practices can improve on-farm relationships

Stronger farm business practices can also improve on-farm relations and decrease associated stress. Focus group participants shared that having regular meetings with family members and employees aided in planning decisions and ensuring strong communication. Some interviewees commented that drawing up contracts, documenting transition plans, and setting business timelines could improve inter-generational relations and could provide greater accountability than verbal agreements about farm management practices. This can be particularly helpful in managing farm transitions between generations, which interviewees suggested as one of the more challenging business practices to take on.

“Transition planning really helped; I wouldn’t recommend anyone go through that without a professional. It helps take care of all of the little difficulties and open communication.”

Farmer, Western Canada



FARM ADVISORS

Advisors can be very beneficial to both farm success and mental health. Farmers suggested that using advisors – such as farm transition coaches, farm business management consultants, or crop advisors – can help ease the burden of making large management decisions. They noted that while they still felt they had the final say in making a decision, there was more support around them to explore multiple options. This creates a sense of “sharing the risk” and farmers also suggested that having multiple advisors and opinions helped to create open communication about the direction of the business.

Advisors play a critical role in farmer’s support networks because they have personal relationships and are often directly involved in the most stressful decisions. However, it can be difficult for advisors to navigate sensitive topics such as mental health when operating in a business capacity. This is largely due to lack of knowledge as mental health is oftentimes not a core area of expertise. This presents an interesting opportunity to develop and deliver mental health literacy training for this key segment of the farm business management community.

“When you are making it through planning with advisors, you are still ultimately doing it, but you have more confidence, and can make the best decision based on the information you have. You don’t have to take the entirety of the blame though. You still have the same amount of responsibility, but don’t have the incredible weight of doing that on your own.”

– Farmer, Western Canada

“I feel like for me it has been difficult to be empathetic and listen without taking it on and affecting my own mental health as I am not a trained psychologist. If we could have training on how to deal with it and where the resources are it would make it easier to have respectful conversations.”

– Service Provider, Western Canada



Following a business plan does not eliminate stress entirely

40% of farmers who indicate following a written business plan report still being stressed about unpredictability of the agricultural sector and financial pressures. There is also a positive correlation between monitoring markets and high stress, indicating that farmers would benefit from training in how to interpret and make use of such information.

It is essential to allow flexibility for the changing circumstances associated with farming when creating a business plan. When farmers are asked to create a 5-year plan, it is often perceived as “rigid,” or that the banker will force them to stick to that plan which will inevitably become outdated. In reality, these plans help with forecasting, risk management, and contingency planning. There is an opportunity to enhance education around the benefits of business management planning with a focus on mitigating risk. Ultimately, gathering more information should be viewed as a tool to help reduce stress, thus enabling farmers to better interpret market information is an area for further consideration.

There is a positive correlation between monitoring markets and high stress, indicating that farmers would benefit from training in how to better interpret and make use of such information

Participants in a focus groups saw great value in improving farm business management practices to handle price fluctuations and disease outbreaks. They felt it was worthwhile to plan for potential risks in order to “weather the storm” when challenges arise. Discussing problems openly can lead to greater peace of mind and reduce fear of the unknown. A proactive response appears best, since creating plans in times of stress is difficult. Another important aspect of the business is maintaining relationships with bankers and advisors. As one farmer commented, “the relationships you build are more imperative than ever, and you’ve got to lean on those things in difficult times.”

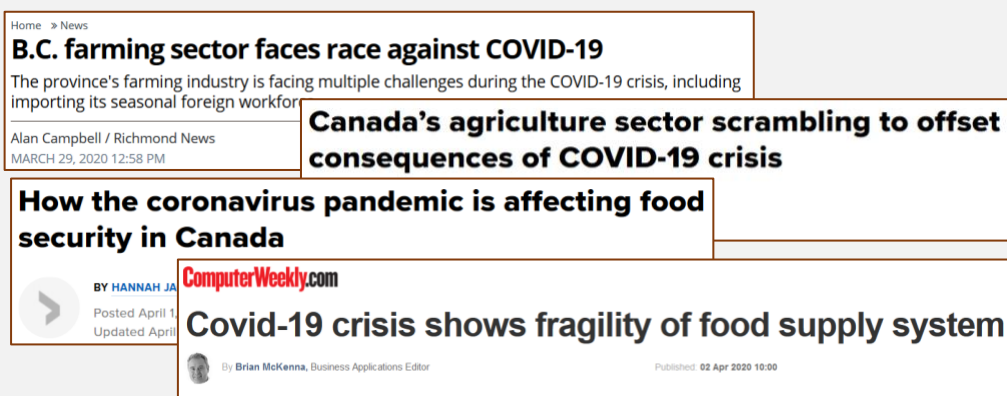


“Good business management doesn't avoid crises like trade wars or crop failures, but it helps get you through those times.”

Farmer, Western Canada

Emergency Preparedness: Emerging Lessons from COVID-19

During this report's composition, the COVID-19 pandemic's effects have impacted life in Canada, and also affected the agricultural sector.⁴¹ Travel restrictions and mandatory quarantines for new arrivals to Canada have raised concerns for farms relying on Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) to meet labour needs. While the Federal Government allows TFWP participants to travel to Canada if they follow the appropriate quarantine methods,⁴² the situation continues to complicate labour acquisition. Domestic labour can fill some roles, but it requires additional training and has led to high attrition rates in the past.⁴³



Most of the data collection for this report occurred well before the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear in Canada. However, farmers did comment on the importance of emergency preparedness as a part of business management. Food provision is an essential service and has implications for farmers, processors, and distributors. Responses to limit the spread of the pandemic have caused disruptions to the supply chain, creating shifts in demand and potential challenges for farmers trying to get their products to markets. In terms of immediate responses to COVID-19, organizations such as FCC have set up emergency financial assistance for farmers and agri-businesses.⁴⁴

While the pandemic's full effects remain to be seen, the crisis has amplified farmers' concerns around labour needs, market fluctuations, and trade networks. These economic effects take a toll on farmers and create stresses outside of their control. Mental health supports for farmers are key in times of emergency when much of society is relying on the agricultural sector to continue to meet basic human nutrition needs.

"Spring isn't waiting for us to figure out labour issues, it's coming either way. This has the potential to impact the amount of food being harvested this fall, and ultimately impacting our own food security as Canadians."

*Farmer, Atlantic Canada
(Grant, T., April 1, 2020, para. 5)*

3.5 Effectiveness of Support Programs and Resources

Support networks and extension services in rural and remote areas

There are many barriers that rural populations encounter when accessing mental health support. With a lack of mental health services in rural areas, farmers may have to leave for extended periods of time for a counselling session in an urban location. Interviewees often noted that it is not financially feasible to leave work for a day and pay for services, and that they rarely trust leaving their farm operations to someone else while they are gone. This makes it important to understand what types of services work for farmers when it comes to supporting mental well-being, and how to build management support mechanisms so farmers can feel comfortable if they need to get away from the farm.

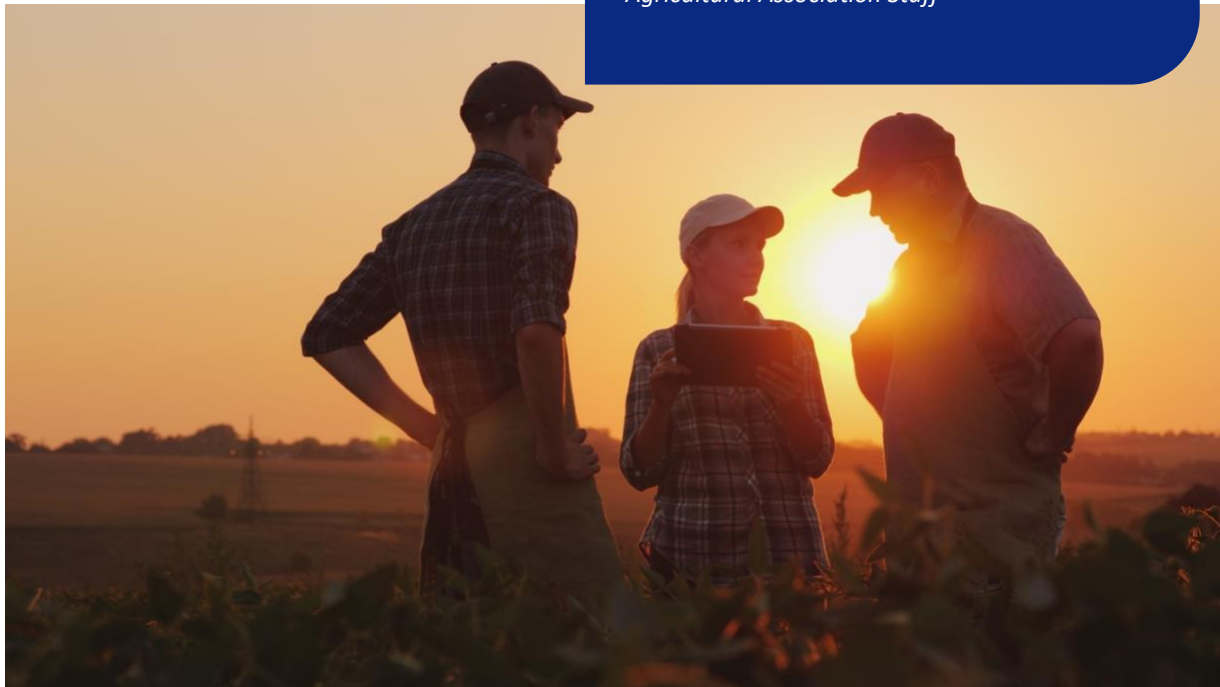
While mental health services have expanded over time, services in rural areas remain more sparse than in urban areas, with fewer qualified professionals available.⁴⁵ This is concerning since poor mental health is also a risk factor in developing physical conditions and illnesses.⁴⁶ Both mental and physical illnesses can require farmers to take time away from their operations, leading to further financial and logistical strains on the business.

Despite a decline in extension services in recent years, changes in communication technologies can allow for greater access to support services from across the country. However, when it comes to supporting mental health, tele-health or online services can provide additional support, but they may not provide a complete substitute for in-person counselling or therapy.⁴⁷ It is imperative to evaluate the mental health resources currently available to members of the Canadian agricultural sector, as this will identify best practices in current resources and will determine areas needing further improvement.

In some parts of Canada, geographic remoteness contributes to feelings of isolation. Farmers' interaction can be limited during their busy season to service providers who come out to the farm (e.g., seed and equipment dealers, agronomists, veterinarians, and financial advisors). Farmers may not leave their property for weeks during this time, which is also the most stressful time of the year. In addition, farmers struggling with mental health may not recognize or acknowledge they are in need of support. Neighbouring farmers, peers, and family members are also important people in a farmer's support system. Service providers who frequent the farm could also be a valuable support network for farmers.

"As field reps, and I think it's the same for consultants: we often don't know someone is struggling until it gets to a crisis point. But it is easier to help people manage their well-being before it gets to that point."

Agricultural Association Staff



Focus group participants and interviewees discussed important barriers and opportunities that exist for expanding farmer's support network, which are summarized below.

Table 8. Barriers to expanding farmers' support network.

Barriers to Expanding Farmers' Support Network
<p>Farmers are sometimes hesitant to receive help from service providers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Though many farmers have personal relationships with their service providers, many suggested they would be uncomfortable with discussing their mental health with them. • Farmers expressed hesitation about discussing mental health with bankers and insurance providers, as they think it might prevent their ability to receive loans and coverage. • Some farmers expressed that they believe their service providers should concentrate on their service, i.e. veterinarians should only be worried about animal health, not the farmer.
<p>Service providers are cautious about putting their profession at risk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without proper knowledge of how to navigate conversations, service providers do not want to "step on toes" and risk their business with the farmer. • Sales representatives were troubled with balancing the need to make sales, and potentially losing clients because of difficult conversations around mental health.

Table 9. Opportunities to expand farmers' support network.

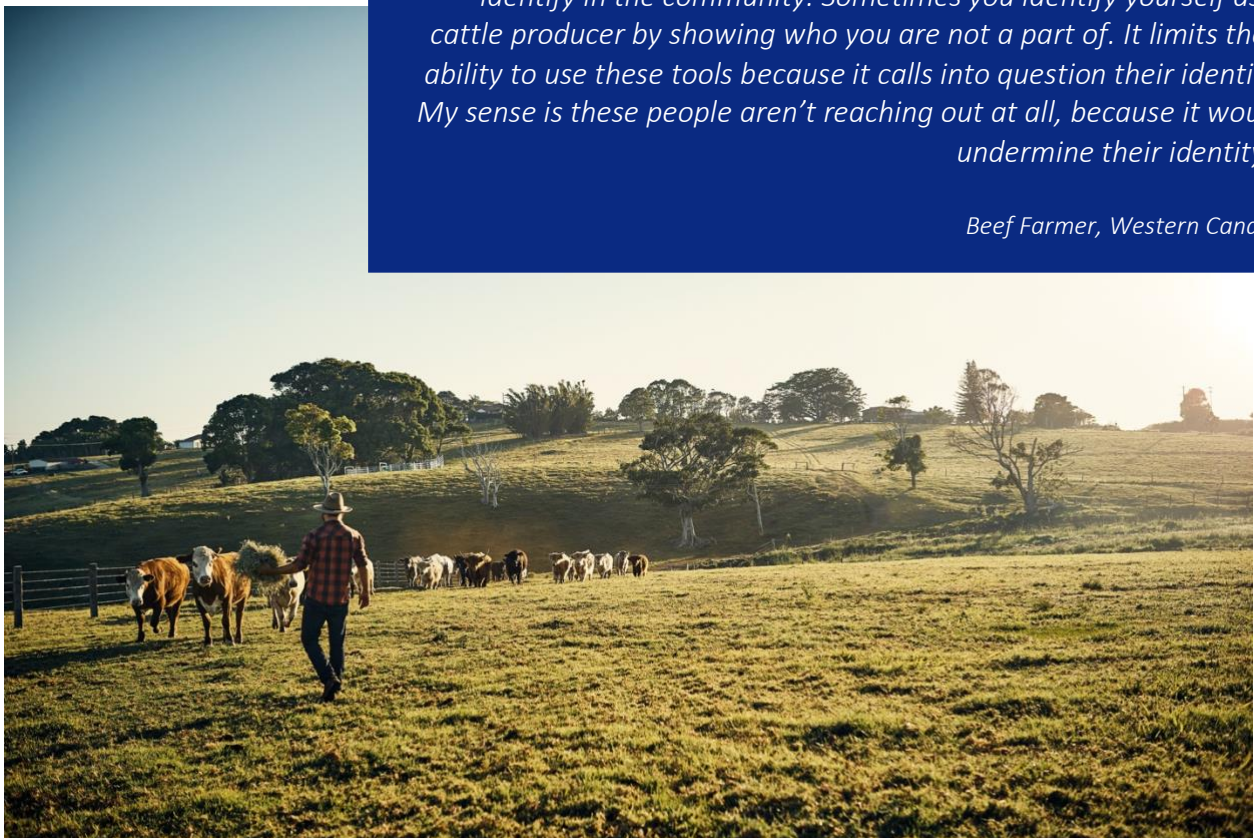
Opportunities to Expand Farmers' Support Network
<p>Service providers are willing to be there for farmers, given the right training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some service providers expressed interest in training so that they could learn to properly discuss mental health issues with farmers to extend their support offerings. • Some suggested that being able to recognize the signs early would greatly benefit their ability to offer help, rather than in a crisis.
<p>Service providers are in contact with farmers at a unique point in time</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bankers and accountants are often involved in the biggest decisions, which also carry the most amount of stress. • Farm debt mediators mentioned that they are often in contact with farmers when they are already in crisis mode.
<p>Service Providers can give the answers that farmers need</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some farmers feel that talking with someone who can help with their business management problems sometimes relieves more stress than going to counselling. • Service providers and farmers agreed that open communication can bring peace of mind as both parties are on the same page with business management plans.

Challenges faced by beef farmers in engaging with mental health resources help to illustrate broader trends. Beef farmer culture can place a high value on the image of being a rancher who operates a farm independently.

This stigma prevents farmers from engaging with existing resources or asking for help, out of fear of judgment. This is concerning, because among farmers surveyed, beef farmers were most likely to identify as having low optimism, which was linked to negative mental health outcomes. Farmers may be in great need, but they may be geographically and culturally isolated from the resources that would help them to heal and focus their energies on their business.

"I know in the cattle industry, there is very much an image association to being a rancher. And that image of this tough independent person is how you identify yourself and how you identify in the community. Sometimes you identify yourself as a cattle producer by showing who you are not a part of. It limits their ability to use these tools because it calls into question their identity. My sense is these people aren't reaching out at all, because it would undermine their identity."

Beef Farmer, Western Canada



AGRICULTURAL DIPLOMA PROGRAMS

Agricultural diploma programs may provide a unique opportunity to help reduce the stigma around mental health at the farm level. The academic setting creates a safe forum for students to discuss mental health issues as part of regular course curriculum, thereby helping to reduce the stigma, as well as an opportunity to equip students with skills and techniques to reduce stress and strengthen positive coping mechanisms. Students could recognize symptoms of mental health issues, and would have a better understanding of how to address and navigate these conversations. Further, if organizations develop new programs to support farmer well-being, schools present an avenue to spread the word about these programs. Students can benefit from resources they learn and share their knowledge with family and friends back home.

Students have shown interest in learning about mental health. One instructor commented that when they held a mental health first aid course, students were engaged and willing to learn. He noted that without this course, the students would have gone back to the farm without knowing resources available. Instructors and administrators said they were willing to incorporate mental health topics into human resources management courses. Unfortunately, cost and time remain barriers in terms of bringing in additional courses and units on dedicated mental health first aid training for students.

The opportunity to provide students with resources to take back to the farm is an important opening within the farm career cycle to both extend the support network around farmers and shift the stigma around mental health. Reducing the cost to schools and connecting instructors with facilitators would be powerful steps in better equipping students for their future careers.



Successes and Challenges of mental health support programs

While the stigma around mental health appears to be gradually changing, many interviewees suggested that at the farm level there is still much work to do in eliminating it. Stigma, in addition to the isolation, creates a significant barrier to accessing mental health support. Agricultural service providers who are mental health-literate are better able to navigate this conversation around mental health, which can help to reduce the stigma at the farm level over the long term.

“What’s working is that we are all talking and breaking down the stigma, but we aren’t anywhere farther ahead in terms of services. We are just putting a band-aid on what people need.”

Agricultural Association Staff, Central Canada

The challenges presented above call for effective mental health and business supports that focus on the unique circumstances relevant to farmers. The research for this report identified three key elements as critical to the overall impact of mental health support programs:

- Minimal to no cost to access the program
- Delivery by professionals who understand farming
- The opportunity to participate with “no questions asked”

Farmers noted problems when trying to access current mental health programs and services. If support is not agriculture-specific, farmers can spend time and money on services where they feel they have to explain their situation multiple times before addressing any personal problems. This, combined with general difficulties in finding services, can give the impression that services are not worth the effort needed to access them. Thus, it is imperative for program facilitators to be well-versed in the agricultural industry and lifestyle to attend to challenges that are unique to farm businesses.

In addition, farmers shared a preference for programs that show integrity and care for participants. They noted that farmers can easily detect when a program is aimed at promoting or selling a service and that they would quickly lose interest in such initiatives. Many encouraged programs to minimize any paperwork required for participation, and to operate anonymously in order to overcome stigma that can discourage farmer engagement.

Examples of effective models for farmer mental health support

As highlighted in the earlier environmental scan for this project, there are a number of programs across Canada that support farmer mental health and farm business management.⁴⁸ Four initiatives which contain key characteristics for successful mental health support for farmers are highlighted here.

PEI Farmer Assistance Program

Funded through the Prince Edward Island Provincial Government, the Farmer Assistance Program offers free counselling services to those farmers that are a part of the PEI Federation of Agriculture or National Farmers Union, their immediate families, and their employees. With flexible hours, the counsellors are able to provide short-term counselling and refer to other services within the community. The service begins through a completely anonymous phone line, which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Oftentimes, this phone call is where services end, as farmers are only looking for someone to talk to. If there is a desire to see a counsellor, farmers and their immediate families are often able to book a session within two weeks. They can attend up to six sessions free of charge, and counsellors are also able to provide direction to other resources that might be available.

Why it works: No Cost to farmers. Having free access to counselling sessions makes it easy and accessible for farmers to try it out. If it is not the right fit for the farmer, the program also helps them navigate the system to find what will work.

Lennox & Addington (L&A) Farmer Wellness Program

Inspired by the PEI Farmers Assistance Program, the L&A Farmer Wellness program provides free counselling services from a trained professional who has experience with agriculture. It is funded through local fundraising, and a contribution from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. The service provides three free sessions to those members of the Lennox & Addington Federation of Agriculture and their immediate families. Session hours are flexible and can occur over the phone, over Skype, at the farm, or at the counsellor's office, making the program accessible to farmers in remote areas.

Why It works: No Cost to Farmers, Farmer-Specific, Accessible. Farmers are able to have free sessions over the phone (e.g., while they are in the tractor), and do not have to feel the guilt of taking a day off work for their mental health. Flexible hours and location of services also helps work around farmers' schedules.

Sentinel Program

The Sentinel program in Quebec calls on those who are in direct contact with farmers. The program trains “sentinels” to recognize those who are struggling with mental health and potentially at risk of suicidal behaviour, and provide a link between them and the area’s mental health resources. According to the Union des producteurs agricole (UPA), the role of the sentinel “can be compared to that of people capable of giving first aid or performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation: members of the community, trained to act quickly, provide support while waiting for specialists to take over.”⁴⁹ Often times, these sentinels are other farmers who understand the stresses that are involved in the situation, and even are able to help around the farm when things are going badly. Having a farmer-to-farmer interaction creates a “no pressure” dialogue that helps to create an additional support network around the farmer.

Why it works: Farmer-Specific. Farmers may not readily open up about their feelings, unless they are able to relate to the person they are talking to. The program offers direction of how to access resources in a way that is familiar to farmers: peer to peer.

Farmer Specific Crisis Lines

Mental Health crisis lines are available across the country, however, farmers seek those that are specific to agriculture. The Manitoba Farm, Rural, and Northern Support Services as well as Saskatchewan’s Farm Stress line are successful because those who operate the phone lines are highly aware of issues farmers and rural citizens face. Farmers can access these services confidentially. Oftentimes, farmers are looking to talk about their stress, and the farmer-specific crisis line gives them an opportunity to do so with no strings attached.

Why it works: No Cost to Farmers, Farmer-Specific, Anonymous. Flexible hours and an understanding of agriculture from the other side of the phone allows farmers to feel comfortable and open up.

INNOVATIVE PILOT INITIATIVE: IN THE KNOW

A Mental Health First Aid Pilot Project

The “In the Know” program demonstrates how general resources can be tailored to better fit farmer needs. The program provides a mental health literacy workshop for farmers and those who work with farmers (such as veterinarians and agronomists). The program was developed as a streamlined version of the full, 12-hour Mental Health First Aid course provided by the Canadian Mental Health Association.

With “In the Know,” participants learn the signs of distress, the mental health resources available to farmers, and the best ways to manage conversations around mental health.

“In the Know” aims to increase farmer engagement by:

- Using farm-specific examples and stressors to convey information to participants;
- Offering a more accessible 4-hour training workshop, with the option for an 8-hour workshop for those who are interested in learning more;
- Rotating workshop locations in rural areas for less required travel time; an online version is currently being developed as well;
- The facilitator having farm experience, so participants can relate to them and feel comfortable asking questions.



4.0 Analysis and Next Steps

This research has found that farm business management practices offer a significant entry point for managing the stresses of farming. This is a novel approach for promoting positive mental health outcomes for Canadian farmers, and there is a need to improve support and the promotion of farm business management practices (including training and skills development in business management).

Continued work in the mental health space is also critical to supporting positive mental health. Increasing awareness about the importance of mental health, improving mental health literacy, and strengthening access to mental health services for rural areas are all critical elements for success.



4.1 Guiding Principles for Farm Business Management and Mental Health

Three guiding principles for combining farm business management and stress management emerged from this study. These insights are explained below.

Guiding Principle: Farmers are familiar and comfortable with the language of risk management.

Why this is important

Farmers are familiar with talking about risk and managing risk, as it is part of being a farm business operator. Whether they write down risk management plans or not, they continually think about how to avoid and reduce risks or plan contingencies. On the other hand, talking about mental health is a less familiar or comfortable topic. Planning for risk is an essential part of the business planning process, but this may not be recognized as such.

Opportunities

Mental health can be supported without directly talking about mental health. Topics such as risk management, scenario planning, and contingency planning can be valuable activities for farmers that can help farmers address immediate needs and give farmers confidence and more optimism about the future in farming. Being better prepared to deal with the volatility farmers experience can lead to improved peace of mind and overall mental health.



Guiding Principle: Planning ahead means being prepared for the future, not predicting the future.

Why this is important

Bankers and financial advisors often ask farmers to make multi-year business plans. They want to see the thinking that goes into decisions such as building a new barn or investing in a new combine. They want to see a plan for how loans will be repaid. Some farmers find this task difficult because they think that they are being asked to predict the future. Other farmers are hesitant to write down a plan that they are “committed to” when they know that in reality the plan will need to be adapted. It leaves the impression for some that those asking for plans do not understand the unpredictability of agriculture. On the other hand, business plans are noted to provide peace of mind, improve interpersonal relations with family and other support persons and provide a reference point for decision-making.

Opportunities

There is a need to clarify and reposition what it means to have a multi-year business plan and the benefits of planning. Business plans do not need to accurately predict the future. Their purpose is to account for different scenarios and provide guidance on how farmers will continue to operate under difficult circumstances (e.g., crop loss). Business plans should be recast to be more about “being prepared” and “getting ready” for an unpredictable future. Further, they provide a tool to motivate those involved about the future of the business. Farm business plans should include risk management and scenario planning elements. Education around the importance of written farm business plans can be reoriented with an understanding that the future is unpredictable, but that farmers are better able to deal with issues when they are better prepared. Business plans provide a tangible reference point for decision-making and buy-in for the farm team.

Guiding Principle: Farmers can build teams to support decision making.

Why this is important

For some farmers, there is a stereotype that “a good farmer can do everything on their own.” Many of the most successful farm businesses operate as a family unit and often work with a team of advisors, whether formal or informal.⁵⁰ With demands placed on farmers to have expertise in agronomy, economics, administration, and a variety of other fields, it is impossible to be an expert in all areas.

Opportunities

Building formal or informal teams of advisors can be extremely beneficial for farm decision-making, especially if those supporting the farm understand mental health literacy. Advisors bring additional knowledge and an outside perspective to the table. This advice can also lessen the burden of decisions being placed on the farmer’s shoulders. When difficulties arise, it helps to know that a team of peers, family members, and/or advisors has thought through different challenges and weighed in on a course of action.

4.2 Linkages with Recent Research

This research supports and expands on findings in recent literature. In particular, high levels of stress among Canadian farmers identified through the FCC Vision Panel survey reaffirm high levels of stress found in other recent research.⁵¹ Additionally, two of the key stresses identified by Canadian farmers in this study were financial pressures and unpredictability (e.g., weather variability). A recent international systematic review on risk factors for farmers' mental health also highlighted financial difficulties and weather variabilities among the most important influences.⁵² All of these insights are critical as another scoping review by Canadian researchers also confirmed that stress is a key indicator of poor mental health for farmers.⁵³

Another Canadian study highlighted the potential positive influence of spouses/partners, friends, and industry colleagues on farmer mental health.⁵⁴ These insights reflect what was found here, namely that agricultural advisors and sales representatives who regularly visit farms can form important mental health support networks.

When it comes to farmers seeking out mental health help, there are indications that stigma still plays a role in whether or not farmers seek help. Discussions with farmers also emphasized the financial and time costs as important barriers. These findings are consistent with a recent study based in Australia that found that stoic attitudes of farmers and the time required to seek out mental health support were major barriers to farmers seeking support.⁵⁵

This study also reinforces the importance of several of the recommendations from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food (see below) in order to support farmer mental health across Canada.⁵⁶ The set of recommendations from the Standing Committee's report are echoed in this study:

- ✓ Examine auditing and labour review processes to ensure the least amount of stress and disruption to producers and ensure auditors understand producers' processes.
- ✓ When implementing regulatory change, give time for consultation and inform those affected from the start to the end of the process.
- ✓ Develop public awareness campaigns and strategies to combat the online harassment targeted at agricultural workers that result in a high-stress environment.
- ✓ Accelerate the deployment of high-speed internet infrastructure in rural communities. High speed internet is necessary to deliver online mental health services.
- ✓ Work with key stakeholders to improve mental health support and insurance coverage for farmers.
- ✓ Invest in educating key stakeholders that work directly with farmers to detect signs of psychological distress and refer farmers to helpful resources.
- ✓ Increase awareness and prevention of mental health challenges to educate future farmers about the challenges they may face.
- ✓ Work with provincial and territorial partners to fund activities that provide mental health assistance to farmers and farm families.
- ✓ Oversee national coordination of research and activities that target farmer mental health.
- ✓ Facilitate, coordinate and promote phone help lines and online mental health services for farmers and Canadians in rural communities.

4.3 Opportunities for Future Research

There are several opportunities for future research. As addressed in the environmental scan for this project, there are several important knowledge gaps related to Canada-specific data on farmer mental health, furthering our understanding of the connection between mental health and farm management, and improving mental health support and resources.⁵⁷ This report has contributed to all of these gaps but there are opportunities for further research in the following areas:

- Mental health and emergency preparedness
- New business management training approaches
- Mental health and farm safety
- Mental health and animal welfare
- Mental health and farm advisory networks (extension, vets, bankers, agronomists)



4.4 Recommendations and Action Items

There are a number of opportunities that Farm Management Canada and the agricultural industry as a whole can explore to better support farmer mental health in Canada. The recommendations are organized according to four key themes that emerged through this research (Figure 29). Each recommendation is followed by a number of action items. Many of the action items support and reinforce the House of Commons Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food's findings and recommendations. Other action items speak to the unique focus of this report on the connection between mental health and farm business management.

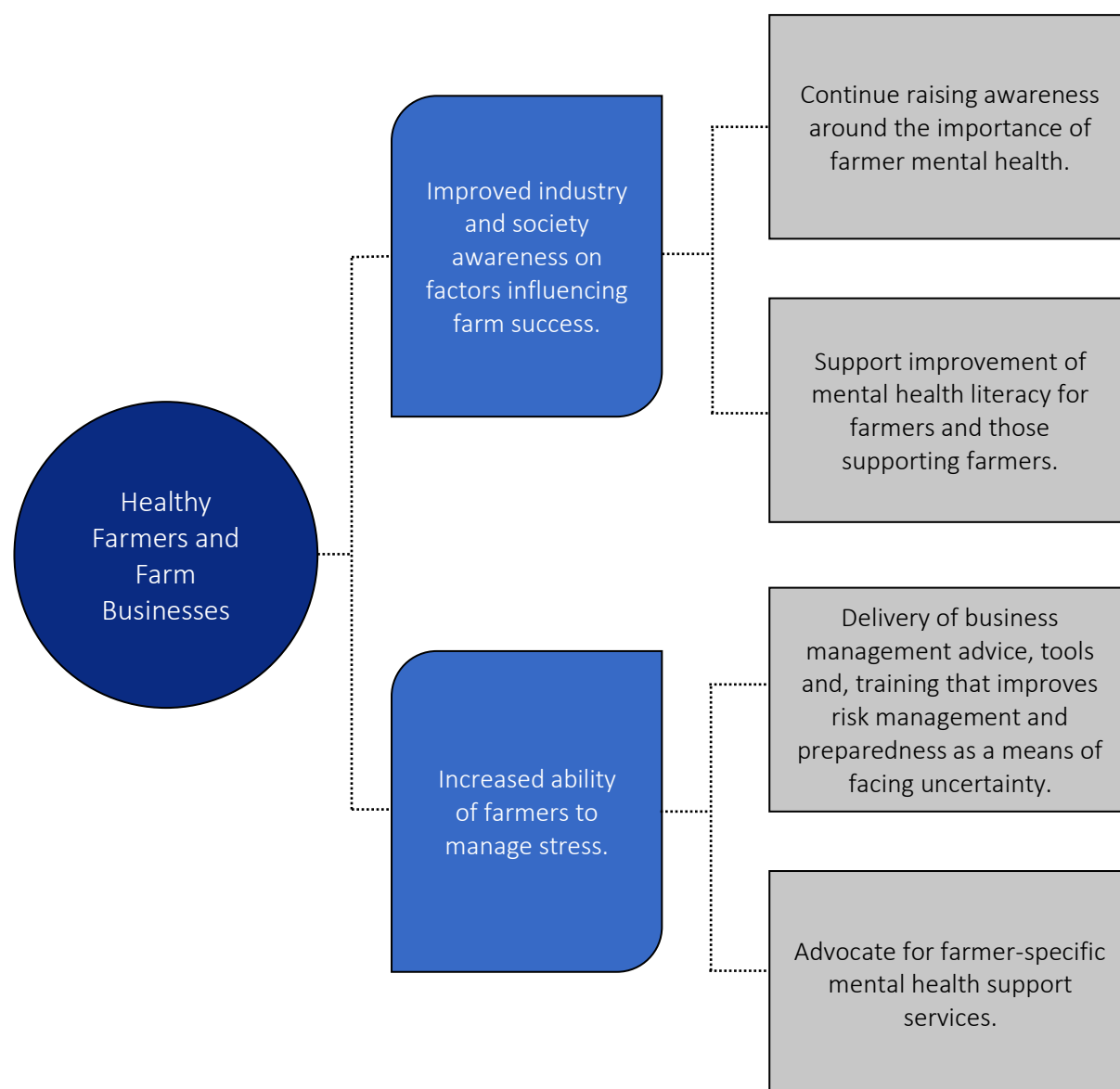


Figure 29: Relating key themes and recommendations for improving farmer mental health.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Continue raising awareness around the importance of farmer mental health.

- Communicate the impacts of mental health on those working in agriculture.
- Promote and support campaigns aimed at raising awareness about farmer mental health and reducing stigma.
- Develop industry-wide strategies to address online harassment by the general public targeted at farmers and agricultural workers. There is a need to educate the public on realities of Canadian agriculture.
- Explore opportunities to enhance rural public health capacity as it relates to mental health.
- Continue to advocate for accelerated high-speed internet infrastructure in rural Canada. This infrastructure is a necessity for both business management technologies and online mental health service delivery.
- Communicate the connection between mental health and farm business management including the impact of mental health on managing the farm and farm business management practices that support mental health.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Support improvement of mental health literacy for farmers and those supporting farmers.

- Deliver mental health information sessions and training at industry events and through online learning channels.
- Explore new communication and learning channels to promote mental health literacy such as forums where farmers feel safe to share their stories.
- Develop and provide a list of existing mental health resources for farmers to be provided during industry learning events. This can also be shared through print materials, agricultural media, and other farm organization communication channels.
- Advocate for mental health literacy training in college and university agriculture programs to promote long-term mental health.
- Advocate for agricultural advisors and others who have regular contact with farmers (e.g., family, peers, etc.) to take mental health literacy training. The industry as a whole would benefit from greater sensitivity and skills to recognize and support those struggling with mental health issues.
- Support mental health literacy training among farmers through expansion of programs such as the In the Know program.
- Explore means of securing funding to further support and subsidize mental health literacy programs for farmers and those supporting farmers.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Deliver business management advice, tools, and training that focuses on risk management and preparedness as a means of facing uncertainty.

- Develop and use language around risk management, scenario and contingency planning, or preparedness when giving advice about long-term business planning. Convey the message to farmers that business planning is not meant to be static or rigid and that it can help to be prepared or get ready for the future.
- Make business skills workshops more accessible in rural and remote areas. Considerations may include grants/bursaries or investments in technologies for rural-based farm organizations.
- Continue to provide training workshops to educate farmers about ways to effectively incorporate business management on the farm. Resources for farmers could include easy-to-use templates for common activities, scenario planning tools, and business plan templates that include risk and contingency elements. Incorporating some formality into a farm business, such as business planning and business meetings, can help make it more manageable. How to build an effective decision support team is another strategy that can be promoted (e.g., who to include and how they can help).
- Increase accessibility and availability of risk management and scenario planning tools that can help farmers prepare for the uncertainty they will face in the future. For example, the Farm Management Canada Roots to Success training program. Roots to Success is a training program that uses the various risk areas and addresses them throughout a workshop type setting in which farmers and advisors go through each risk area and for their own farm. It is teaching individuals how to create a risk management plan.
- Explore ways to incorporate mental health into emergency management planning.
- Conduct medium to long term research on the effects of farm business management on farmer mental health. The goal of this research should be to find effective ways to deliver farm business management as a means to cope with farm-related stressors.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Advocate for farmer-specific mental health support services.

- Promote successful programs to farmers who are eligible for them in each province.
- Advocate for the expansion of successful mental health support programs such as P.E.I.'s Farmer Assistance Program, Quebec's Sentinel Program and farm stress and crisis lines in provinces where they do not exist. Consider national programming to effectively and equitably service all provinces and territories. Promote the importance of including program staff with experience and knowledge of agriculture and the realities of farming.
- Explore opportunities to target demographic groups including youth and women with mental health support services that meet their unique needs.
- Establish a means for collaboration between industry organizations and governments to establish a community of practice or national centre to share knowledge for rural mental health resources.
- Explore opportunities for research on the potential to revitalize extension services across Canada as a means of providing accessible and affordable support for farm business management.

5.0 Conclusion

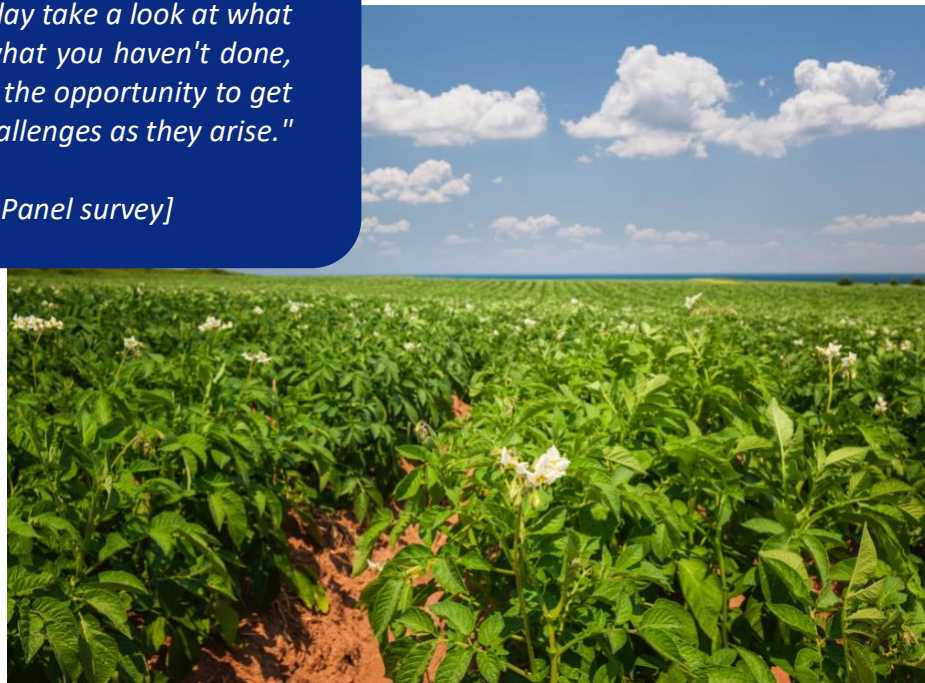
Recent research and literature have documented clear concerns with respect to farmer mental health. The literature demonstrates that farmers have significantly higher stress levels than the general population. Agricultural work presents a unique lifestyle with specific stressors and roadblocks to accessing health services. This report helps to illuminate how these stressors manifest in farmers' lifestyles and how they affect (and are affected by) farm business management. While management practices cannot entirely eliminate stress, they can play a significant role in reducing stress and promoting positive coping mechanisms.

Organizations like Farm Management Canada can support farmers through farm business management education that seeks to help farmers mitigate and manage risks. Business planning needs to acknowledge the variability inherent in farming and provide tools for better contingency planning, based on possible business scenarios.

This report sets out specific recommendations and actions to better support the mental health of farmers, and ultimately support healthy farmers and farm businesses. Farmers need mental health supports that work with their needs and schedules, and that understand their lifestyle. There is a clear opportunity to build upon existing services and develop new ones to address this public health need. Supporting farmer mental health requires a multi-faceted approach that should include the insights in this report for helping farmers manage stress.

"At the end of the day take a look at what you've done, not what you haven't done, and be grateful for the opportunity to get to learn from all challenges as they arise."

Farmer [FCC Vision Panel survey]



Appendix A FCC Vision Panel Survey Questions

Q1. When it comes to managing your operation, how often do you do the following (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always, N/A):

- Follow a written business plan
- Adhere to a budget
- Keep records up to date
- Follow health & safety standards
- Monitor markets
- Benchmark performance
- Mitigate risk to the best of my ability
- Consult with others (family, associates, advisors) when unsure about something
- Seek training/knowledge
- Proactively anticipate current / future hiring needs
- Encourage employee uptake of a wellness program
- Openly communicate about the future of the operation with those impacted (farm transition / succession)

Q2a. You indicated that you regularly follow a written business plan to manage your operation. To what extent does having/following the plan contribute to your peace of mind regarding your operation?

- To a large extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a small extent
- Not at all
- I'm not sure

Q2b. In a few sentences or less, how has creating a business plan contributed to your peace of mind?

Q3a. You indicated that you follow a business plan to manage your operation. In your opinion, to what extent would having/following a business plan contribute to your peace of mind regarding your operation?

- To a large extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a small extent
- Not at all
- I'm not sure

Q3b. What are the main reasons you have not created and/or followed a written business plan to date? Select up to three reasons from the list below.

- I lack the time to dedicate towards it
- I don't know what to include
- I believe it requires constant updates
- I am succeeding without it
- I feel there are inadequate resources available to get me started
- I perceive it to be an overwhelming task
- I believe it will cause me stress
- I don't think it is worth my time
- Other, (please specify)

Q4. The following is a list of stressors that are common to producers in the ag industry. To what extent do you consider each to be a stress factor in your life today?

To define your range of answer options, "not at all" indicates this is not considered to be a stress factor in your current life and "to a large extent" indicates this is considered a major stress factor at this time resulting in physiological changes such as sleep loss, changes in appetite, body/headaches, etc.

- Workload pressures
- Proximity to recreational, health, &/or social services
- Financial pressures
- Interpersonal conflicts with family
- Interpersonal conflicts with non-family
- Farm transition considerations
- Unpredictability of the ag industry (i.e. Weather / market prices)
- Public trust in Canadian ag production

Q5. What is characteristic of you when you are under a great deal of stress? Select the option that best completes each statement:

"When I am under a great deal of stress, I ... [less than usual | to the same extent | more than usual]"

- ... spend time working
- ... attend social/family gatherings
- ... seek help/advice from family &/or friends
- ... crunch numbers related to my financial standing
- ... assess / plan for different outcomes
- ... make informed decisions in a timely manner
- ... seek information / learn

- ... sleep
- ... feel in control of my emotions
- ...feel motivated about my work

Q6. Consider the following statements and indicate the extent you agree (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree). There are no right or wrong answers.

- In uncertain times, I usually expect the best
- It's easy for me to relax
- If something can go wrong for me, it will
- I'm optimistic about my future
- I enjoy my friends a lot
- It's important for me to keep busy
- I hardly ever expect things to go my way
- I don't get upset too easily
- I rarely count on good things happening to me
- Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad

Q7. In a sentence or two, what business advice would you give to another producer facing mental health challenges who felt unable to cope with farming responsibilities?

Q8. Please complete the following statement:

If an organization wants to offer business support to producers in ways that are beneficial to mental health, I recommend ...

Q9. We welcome any additional thoughts you may have related to the connection between mental health and farm management in Canadian ag.

Appendix B Focus Group Guide

Activity 1 Worksheet:

<u>Common Stressors for Farmers</u>	<u>Farm Best Management Practices</u>
	Following a formal business plan
	Adhering to a budget
Workload pressures	Keeping records up to date
Isolation	Having an HR strategy
Financial pressures	Having an employee/team wellness program
Interpersonal conflicts with family	Having a health and safety strategy
Interpersonal conflicts with non-family	Planning for transition or succession
Unpredictability of the ag industry (e.g. weather, markets, trade issues)	Monitoring markets
Public trust in Canadian ag production	Benchmarking performance
Farm transition considerations	Identifying/mitigating risk to the best of my ability (e.g., livestock diseases, crop pests)
	Consulting with others when I need advice (family members, associates, advisors)
	Seeking training/knowledge

Activity 2 Discussion Questions:

- Do you feel implementing farm business management practices contributes to positive mental health / peace of mind? Why or why not?
- How could we more effectively design and deliver business support services for farmers (in ways that are beneficial to mental health)?
- Do you feel the right mental health supports would help you manage your farm business?

Appendix C Interview Guide for Farmer Interviews

Opening Questions

- What is your interest in this project on mental health and farm business management?

Familiarity with Farm Business Management

- What is your experience with farm business management? (Taking a strategic and proactive approach to managing your people, finances and natural resources)
- Specifically, what is your experience with creating and following a farm business plan?
 - For example, do you regularly create and follow a budget? Do you do HR planning? What is your process for transition planning? How do you identify and manage risks?

Relationship Between Mental Health and FBM

- What comes to mind for you when you think about mental health and managing the farm?
- Can you think of a time when you or someone close to you felt incredibly stressed and unable to cope with farming responsibilities? If so, briefly describe what happened and how you/they responded. What were the impacts on your/their farm business? Were there other impacts?
 - Do you feel that any aspects of farm business management helped (or might have helped) prevent or alleviate those stresses?
 - Examples of farm management practices: Follow a formal business plan, Adhere to a budget, Keep records up to date, Have an HR strategy, Have an employee wellness program, Have a health and safety strategy, Plan for transition or succession, Monitor markets, Benchmark performance, Identify/mitigate risk to the best of my ability, Consult with others when I need advice (family members, associates, advisors), Seek training/knowledge
- Have there been times when the thought of implementing or maintaining farm business practices have contributed to increased stress? Please tell us about your experience.
- What do you think is needed in order to more effectively design and deliver business support services for farmers (in ways that are beneficial to mental health)?

Summary and Closing Questions

- All things considered, what do you see as the main issues when it comes to the relationship between farmer mental health and farm business management?
- Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel is important? Have we missed anything?
- Are you aware of other people or organizations that we should speak to about this project?

Appendix D Interview Guide for Industry Interviews

Opening Questions

- Tell me about the organization that you represent. How does your organization's mandate or purpose relate to farmer mental health?
- What is your interest in this project on mental health and farm business management?

Experiences with Farmer Mental Health

- Do you know of a farmer that has struggled with their mental health? Do you know if it affected their business? Walk me through how the situation developed and what happened for the farmer.
- We are also interested in the flip-side of that question. Do you know of any stories or examples where having farm business practices in place (taking a strategic and proactive approach to managing your people, finances and natural resources) helped to improve a farmer's mental health?
- What is your familiarity with existing mental health resources and supports for farmers? What is your perspective on what is working and what is not working?
 - What are your thoughts on what kinds of supports are needed?

Linkages Between Farm Business Management and Mental Health

- Do you feel that having (written) business practices in place improves farmer mental health? Why? Why not?
 - Farm business management is taking a strategic and proactive approach to management people, finances, and natural resources
 - Marketing, budgeting, monitoring markets, annual plans, risk assessment and management, transition planning, etc.
- When you think about farm business management practices, what are the biggest barriers to farmers implementing these practices?
 - Are there aspects of farm business management you feel have contributed to increased stress or a decrease in mental health?
- All things considered, what do you think is needed in order to more effectively design and deliver business support services for farmers (in ways that are beneficial to mental health)?

Summary and Closing Questions

- Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel is important? Have we missed anything?
- Are you aware of other people or organizations that we should speak to about this project?

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